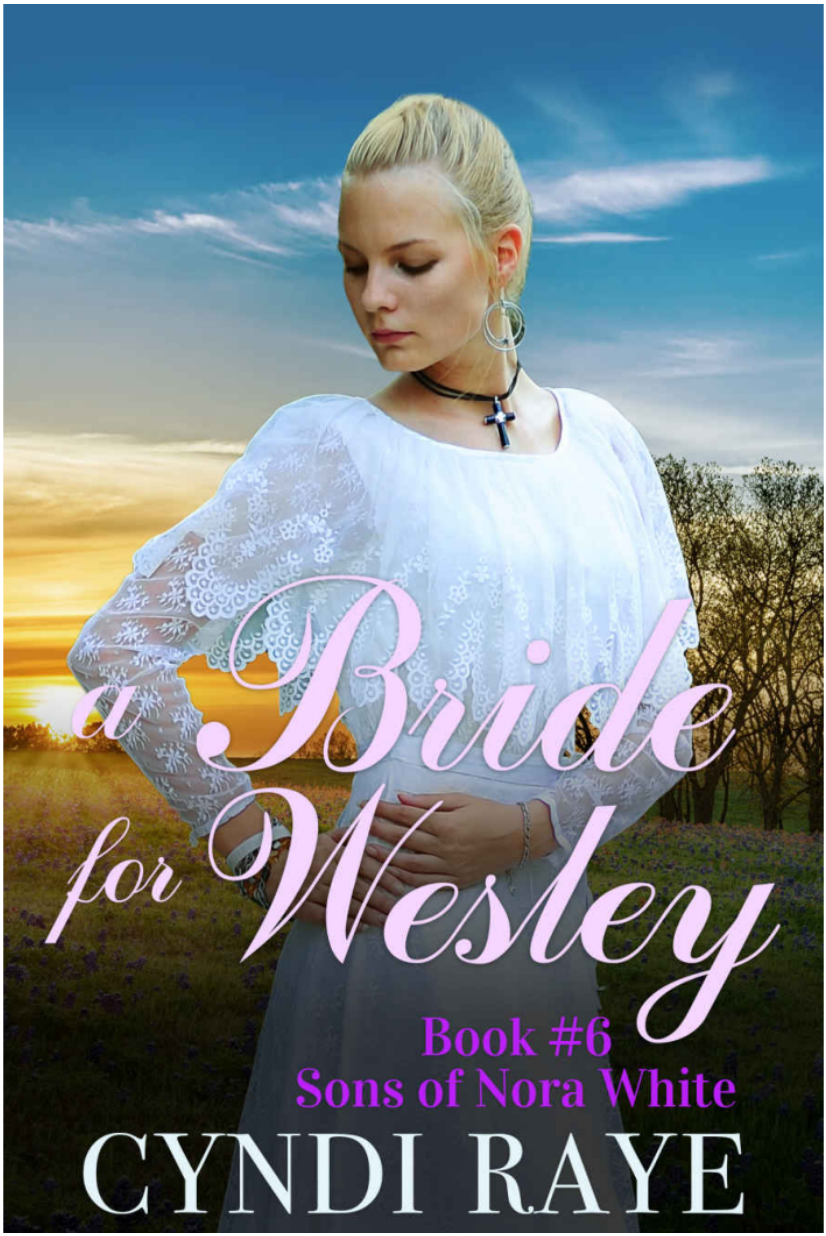

a Bride
for Wesley
Book #6
Sons of Nora White
CYNDI RAYE

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A FREE Chapter

A Bride for Wesley

by

Cyndi Raye

Sons of Nora White Series Book #6

From the author of Brides of Wichita Falls and Brides of Mill Ridge, this spin-off set on a small ranch about an hours ride from Wichita Falls is about a secret that has been kept from Nora White for ten years by her three sons Luke, Adam and Samuel. Because of the secret, the boys had refused to marry.

When Nora decides it's time to find a mail order bride, starting with her oldest son, mystery and lies begin. You won't want to miss each book starting with Volume 1.

When do you find out the secret? I'm sure by the time you read the first volume, you will have a good idea of what happened but it won't come out until volume 3.

It's best to read this in order, starting with A Bride for Luke first, then A Bride for Adam, A Bride for Samuel and then A Groom for Nora, A Bride for Russell and now:

A Bride for Wesley

This is a special series for my readers who like a bit of a mystery and ongoing secrets.

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Thanks to Erlene Click for choosing the name of Olivia's mare: Dreamer. What a perfect name!

Book Cover Artist

SilverHeart Publishing

Chapter 1

“I simply refuse.” There. She said it. Olivia faced her father without blinking an eye. If she were to make this work, she’d have to be strong.

Clinton David Morris stared hard. He leaned back in his leather upholstered high-back chair, tapping his fingertips on the oak desk. The noise grated on Olivia’s last nerve.

He wasn’t her natural father. Morris adopted Olivia and her brother Calvin from the orphan train when they were small children. Over the years she had studied his every move. She had watched from a distance when an opponent went up against him.

He’d sit back, tap his fingers on the desk, make the person nervous as he stared them down with those evil eyes. Most men had shied away and agreed to whatever her adopted father demanded. His calculating, manipulating mannerisms didn’t scare her one bit.

She was not going to give in.

Not this time.

It was her life they were talking about and she didn’t want to end up in a loveless marriage with someone just like her father. She wasn’t about to give up her hopes and dreams of helping those less fortunate. Not when she had so much.

Her chin went up a notch.

Her father laughed, trying to scare her. There was not a speck of compassion in those coal black eyes. Over the years, Olivia had found out the hard way the only reason she was a part of this rich family was because of a woman who was unable to reproduce. Morris had wanted no part of taking in orphans but obliged his wife when she saw the children on the orphan train.

It had been a Morris family secret until her brother and Morris had a loud fight a year ago. No one knew Gaither Jones had been waiting in the foyer for a chance to speak with her father and overheard everything.

Gaither Jones was the only one who knew of their secret. Now, he was trying to bribe Clinton David, the master of manipulators, into marrying Olivia in order to keep quiet.

When Morris and his wife lived in Pittsburgh many years ago, a train had come through while her mother had been out shopping. Since she was unable to have her own, she insisted she wanted a boy and a girl from the train. Over the years, the brother and sister found out there was no love attached to either one of them.

Yet, even though their fate was sealed, they never had to work hard or become someone's slave like some of the children had. Olivia had lived a blessed life being taken from the streets of New York City to one of the most famous ranches in Texas.

Even though she was grateful, it was still her life at stake now. Her brother Calvin taught her to stand up for herself, as

he had done a year ago. She missed him terribly. He had always given her advice but he wasn't here right now so she had to stand up to Morris on her own.

"You may laugh all you want, Father. I can no longer hide my heritage. I've kept quiet all these years because you made me. I'm eighteen now, old enough to be on my own, to make my own decisions. I intend to help other unfortunate orphans and cannot, absolutely cannot deny that I was one!"

Her father stood, his knuckles white as they pushed against the oak desk top. "Olivia! We have kept this nasty secret all these years. Most people do not know you are adopted since we moved away from Pittsburgh. Here in Dallas, no one knows you came from that awful train. I demand it to be kept our secret, do you understand?"

"I refuse to marry a man like Gaither Jones!" She wanted to shout out he was as mean and cold-hearted as her own father but pressed her lips together in spite of herself.

"He'll be good for you. I can count on him keeping your past in the past. No one will ever know you were an orphan. We've kept the secret for years, Olivia. My reputation here demands you keep quiet."

She seethed with anger. "I'm not interested in marriage. I want to help others. Is that so wrong?"

"It will never get you anywhere helping those heathens." His face reddened as he leaned across the desk, staring at Olivia as if he controlled her mind.

She wasn't afraid. He may be a heartless soul but he had

never laid a hand on her. “Is that how you see me, as a heathen?” She lifted the hem of her skirts, ready to walk out of his study.

“Hold on, young lady! I do not look at you as a heathen.”

She glared. “Then why do you stare at me as if you cannot stand the site of me? Calvin is gone. He chose to leave because of you. I’ve lost my brother and now you want me to abide your wishes and marry a man who is clearly blackmailing you. Is my life worth it to you?”

He shook his head. “Your life? You have a good life. Without me, you would still be nothing. Nobody wanted you or your brother.”

She almost hung her head in shame.

Then she remembered how Calvin told her she was worthy of a good life. She had a gift of helping others. She had to listen to her heart, not some cold-hearted man who never loved them.

Her heart was telling her there were so many children on the orphan trains that nobody wanted. She knew what that was like. Those horrendous feelings had stayed with her all these years. She wanted to buy a farm or homestead to at least change a few children’s lives.

The man her adopted father wanted her to marry, Gaither Jones, wanted money. He wanted power. She’d never be able to make her dreams come true if she married him. He’d never allow her to help orphans or those less fortunate. She pushed her shoulders back, lifted her head a notch.

“I am Olivia Morris, your daughter, whether you like it or not. You adopted me, promising if I kept quiet about where I came from that you would set me free on my eighteenth birthday with an allotment of cash. Now you are breaking that promise, insisting on this farce of a marriage. You promised me. I’ve kept my end of the bargain, never telling a single soul. You made a deal and now have gone back on your word.”

His face dropped for a split second before he composed himself. Olivia had hit home. Clinton David Morris’s word was like gold in the cattle industry. To say he went back on his promise was a slap in his face. She knew it as well as he did.

“You are as shrewd as me,” he told her. Olivia stared straight ahead, trying to be strong. He laughed out loud, shaking his head before he sat back down.

Olivia placed her hands behind her skirt. She didn’t want him to see how they trembled. Standing up to this man was taking all her energy but she was not about to give up the fight. “I learned from you.”

He began that tapping of the fingertips again. “Then you know I’ll never give in. I’m not afraid of what people say or do.”

“Obviously you are since you have worked so hard to keep us silenced. No one knows your wife wanted children and you were unable to give them to her so she had to adopt heathens from the orphan train!”

“Enough! Your condemnation will not work with me. Things have changed. Because of your brother, our conversation was overheard. Now, you must pay for your brother’s failings.”

“Nonsense. Calvin did nothing wrong except ask for the money you promised him for keeping his mouth shut all these years. You got angry at him for him telling you the truth, that you’ve been monopolizing the industry for years and he wanted no parts of that. Can’t you see, he didn’t want to live your dishonest life. Calvin doesn’t belong here and you know it is the truth!”

“Calvin has dreams of his own ranch. Without my money, he’d have nothing.”

“He acquired those dreams when you began your dirty dealings, otherwise he’d be here working with you. Calvin is too honest to work under a man who lies, cheats and steals from his business rivals. You gave him the promised money and let him walk out the door. Now, I’d like to collect mine and be on my way. There is a life away from here and I plan to live that life.”

Her adopted father grinned. “It’s a shame you weren’t born a man. You have the spunk and tenacity to run my empire someday.”

“No, thank you. I want to be rid of all of this.”

He began to shuffle through his paperwork, an obvious sign of dismissal. “I hate to burst your hopes and dreams, young lady. I have no intention of handing over a dime to you.

Gaither Jones needs to be quieted by your hand in marriage."

Olivia raged inside. She was afraid this was going to happen. In the hopes there may have been one tiny iota of concern and care for her, she wanted to believe her father wasn't the ruthless businessman she had watched take down others over the years.

Her nose went in the air one more time. "Then I will find my own way." Did she even have a clue how to find her own way?

He ignored her.

"You lied to me. Broke a promise. Does this mean I can now proclaim to the world I am from the orphan train?"

"Don't attempt to cross me, daughter."

"Now you call me daughter? You're going to have to pay Gaither Jones off the rest of your life because I have no intention of marrying him."

"Let's strike a deal," her father told her. He wiped some sweat from his forehead with a white handkerchief.

"No. No deals. You broke your word. Why in the world would I ever trust you again?"

"Because I have the money you need."

Did her father honestly think all she wanted was his money? It would help her cause for sure if she had the money she needed, but she wasn't going to give in. "Did you not hear a word I said? I'm not striking a deal with you. I'll find a way to live my life on my own terms."

She turned and left his office, sick to her stomach. She

yearned for her brother, who had been gone over a year now. Calvin had stomped out the door, slamming it hard and never looked back.

She was about to do the same thing, except she had no way to cover her expenses. Even though she had lived on the streets when she was so young, she always had Calvin to protect her.

Who was going to protect her now?

For years she had dreamed of the day she'd be able to leave here, her purse filled with the money he had promised. All she wanted to do was buy a piece of property where she'd be able to take in orphans. She dreamed of teaching them to grow their own food, have them schooled and taught to care for themselves. It would be a safe haven so they never had to worry where they'd lay their head again. With the money her father had promised, she had thought it was a great purpose for her life. Knowing the day she turned eighteen would change her life, she had been looking forward to making her dream come true.

Now, it was never going to happen.

A black cloud fell over Olivia. Her father was banking she'd give in, conform to his ways and marry the man he wanted for her.

She needed to take a walk, get out of this stuffy house for awhile. Digging out her parasol, she asked one of the maids to walk with her. A good long walk along the trinity would unfog her brain, help her to think.

After walking to the river bank, she strolled down main street, peering in the shop windows at the goods. Olivia had a habit of buying candy and food for some of the poor families she'd see near the train depot or walking listlessly down the street, their hopes and dreams shadowed by a harsh reality in sad and scared eyes.

Her heart went out to every single mother and child who didn't have a place to stay. What was wrong with wanting to help?

When she walked through town seeing these poor people without a true home, it reminded her of the promise. The promise she made to herself years ago when she boarded that train. Even though the Morris's were cruel and heartless, she had still found a place to rest her head. Most of the people on the streets had no place, no hopes or dreams. She knew in her heart she'd never conform to her father's ways. There had to be a way to accomplish her goals without his money.

Or, her money, since it had been promised to her ten years earlier as long as she never revealed her past. It had been a bribe back then. She did her part, never told a soul.

Except the man who was known for his word broke a promise to her. To his own daughter. Well, as far as the world was concerned, she was his daughter. Now, she was even ashamed to say she was adopted by this man.

Instead of giving her what he promised, he was forcing her to marry another horrible person. Didn't he know she'd never reveal his secret? Never. She wasn't a vindictive person. If he

had even cared a little bit, he'd know she was a woman of honor, a person who always kept her word. Now, all he wanted was to appease a man who found out the family secret. It had nothing to do with her.

He didn't know her. Never tried to. There was a house filled with cooks, housekeepers and maids that took care of her. Even her adopted mother, Celia, hadn't taken the time to get to know Olivia or Cal. She had wanted darling little children to parade around like dolls for her friends to see.

Now that Olivia was older, she understood better why they had been adopted. All her mother had wanted was something she could not have. So, that's what she got. Her husband gave her whatever she wanted.

They got Calvin and Olivia.

Two orphaned heathens from the orphan train.

The bribes worked when they were eight and nine years old. When they left Pittsburgh, their father promised them a new life and never to tell where they came from. Too afraid to ever tell a soul, all the two wanted was to be taken care of and loved.

They were well taken care of.

Love wasn't a word they'd ever know.

At least Cal was smart enough to get out when the time came. Why her father allowed Cal to go and not her was another dark secret, she was sure. Cal knew something about her father she didn't. It was the only way Clinton David Morris had allowed her brother to leave.

He had written twice in the last year from a cattle ranch in the Montana territory. He was working for someone else, working his way up the ladder, he said. Even though he grew up on their ranch, he understood Montana was a different climate and wanted to learn from the bottom up. Cal's blood money was tucked away in a bank, collecting interest while he learned the business. He had big plans to buy land and make a life for himself ranching.

At least Cal had a plan.

She needed one, too. She wanted away from here as soon as possible. Cal told her he'd come for her when he was settled on his own ranch. She knew he meant well, but that may be years from now. Besides, she wasn't going to depend on him the rest of her life. No, she needed her own plan.

A newspaper caught her eye.

She picked it up and read the article about how mail order brides were needed. Badly.

"You going to buy that?" A crumbly voice behind her caused Olivia to dig in her pocket and hand him a coin.

"I'm sorry. Here."

"Much obliged. Now, go on."

Olivia shook her head, speaking to her companion. "Hilda, we best get back."

The quiet maid walked with her, probably enjoying the walk as much as Olivia. At least the hired help were treated well. They were handsomely paid and had a roof over their heads. It seemed as if everyone in the presence of Clinton

David Morris was treated well.

Except for his children.

Well, his pretend children. She was starting to get angry inside. Anger for what she wasn't allowed to say and do. Tucking the newspaper deep in her reticule, she found her way to her room, ignoring everyone in her path.

It was time to see what this mail order bride stuff was all about.

< > < >

"It's my turn."

"Indeed. Please, come in and have a seat at my table. Tea?" Miss Addie held the door wide open.

Wesley knew it was a matter of time before his mother and Nora White sent him to Miss Addie to match him up with a bride. He'd been looking forward to it, actually. After seeing how his twin brother found a good woman, Wesley was anxious to get started.

Six months after Russell married, his mother and step-mother sat him down at their kitchen table for a *talk*.

Wesley loved life. He was content with his farm and wanted to share it with someone. Most of all, he wanted a companion for his mother. It had to be lonely for her living on a farm with two sons for so many years.

"I understand your brother is well pleased with his bride."

Wesley nodded. "Yes, ma'am. My mothers told me it was

time to do the same thing. I can't wait, to tell the truth."

A smile played across Miss Addie's lips before she took a sip of her tea. Wesley noticed how dainty the china cup was, afraid to pick it up until he saw his hostess grab it with both her hands and grin. "How may I help you, Mr. Young?"

He picked up the fragile cup in one hand and took a slurp. Just one slurp. He much preferred the strong aroma of coffee brewed on the cook stove. "I appreciate you taking time to see me at such short notice. I felt led to visit after Ma and Nora sat me down for a good talking to last week. Again. Figured I gave 'em enough time to worry they wouldn't be getting another bride in the family."

Miss Addie cocked her head. "You are quite the troublemaker, I see that in your eyes."

He nodded and smiled. "Sure am. Those two have been meddling me for the last six months. Actually, from the day my brother got married they've been wanting to match me up with someone. I always had every intention of doing so but it was too much fun making them wonder. A man has to have some fun now and again. The farm life can get monotonous if you don't try to shake things up a bit. Ma finally called me to the table and said she was tired of me playing around."

"The good news is I have the perfect bride for you. Would you care to read the letter she sent?"

"How do you know she's the right one?"

"Gut instincts, Mr. Young. This one needs a man like you to bring some sunshine and laughter into her life."

A frown appeared on Wesley's face. He didn't want some old sourpuss who never laughed. That wouldn't do. It would suck the life right out of him. "I guess I can take a look."

"Why don't I show you her photo first."

Miss Addie stood and went to the side board where a small box sat on top of a doily. She rummaged around first before pulling a letter from the pile. "I believe this is the one."

Wesley took the envelope, noticing a small photo inside. When he turned it over, his eyes popped open. "She's stunning!"

"Yes, she is quite the lady. If you will excuse me, I'll return shortly."

He hadn't even noticed when the matchmaker left the room. Wesley was still staring at the woman in the photograph. Her blonde hair, stretched back into a neat bun showed a flawless face that stared right through him. He didn't want to turn away.

Wesley wanted to stare at her all day. Did he even care what was in the letter? Her high cheekbones accented her large eyes, so blue it looked like you'd want to fall in to her soul. Her dress was immaculate, white with traces of lace on the sleeves and a blend of colors in the skirt. She stood tall and proud. A necklace made of felt was wrapped around her slender neck, with a silver cross hanging down the middle. A small pearl sat in the center of the cross. It looked expensive and from the Victorian era.

He swallowed. Wesley knew he had to read the letter. No

matter how much she bewitched him, this lovely woman had to be perfect not only for him but for his ma. It probably sounded crazy, but he wanted his mother to be happy, too. If she had a companion, Wesley had done his job as a good son.

Knowing his ma would want him to be sure this was the right bride, he tore open the letter.

Dear Miss Addie,

You have been highly recommended as a woman with impeccable and uncanny ways to find me the perfect match. My name is Olivia Morris, daughter of a well-known, prominent businessman here in Dallas. He wishes to marry me off to an unpleasant fellow who is guilty of crimes that I may not speak of in a correspondence letter. Perhaps the hardest reality is my father is insisting upon this marriage.

I am at the age where I've decided to take the bull by the horns and find a husband who has the same hopes and dreams as I. Here is my extended list of must haves, I hope that you will be able to find a suitable match.

1. Handsome. Or, at least pleasant to look at. And kind if the two can be found in one person.

2. I need someone who owns a farm or ranch.

3. A man who loves children.

4. A husband who doesn't frown upon a wife wanting to make her own way.

5. A place large enough for room for orphans.

If these can be applied, please send for me and I will come

immediately to be married. Another reason I chose your agency besides your one hundred percent success rate is because of the thirty day clause in the contract.

Sincere wishes, Miss Olivia Morris

Wesley looked at his reflection in the mirror above the side board. He wasn't hard to look at. He owned a farm, along with his ma and brother, so another plus in his favor. She wanted a man who loves children. Well, that was easy. He loved all children.

"Have you decided?" Miss Addie entered from the other room.

"Seems I have a fair chance. Except I'm not sure what the last two conditions are all about."

"I believe Miss Morris is independent, much like most of the brides here in Wichita Falls. The last part about the orphans, we can ask her if you decide to chose her as a bride."

"She is lovely to look at, that's for sure."

"Now, Mr. Young, looks are not everything, although it is nice to have a pleasant face to look at. Is it your wish to continue?"

"I do believe so. I'm sure my ma will be happy. And, Miss Nora."

Miss Addie leaned over, staring at him. "What about you, Mr. Young. Do you have any doubts at all for yourself?"

Wesley didn't think so. It was good there was a clause in the contract he was about to sign. He didn't want to have some bossy, rich girl making his life miserable. At least they'd have thirty days to annul the marriage if it didn't work out.

He nodded. "I'll take her."

"Indeed. I'll send you details for her arrival."

Wesley wasn't sure how he felt leaving the matchmaker's home. He was elated to be getting married. After all, a wife to come home to every night would be pleasant. He hoped she didn't want him to spend too much time with her, he loved working his farm. That's what his ma was for. The two ladies will have each other.

He was looking forward to the fun times they'd have.

Fun, happy times. No worries. Nothing to keep them from enjoying life. That seemed to be his train of thought. Never worry, just enjoy life.

He left Wichita Falls in a hurry to tell his brother Russell what he had done. He also wanted to see the looks on both mother's faces when they finally realized he listened to them and ordered a mail order bride.

Chapter 2

“Take your hands off of me!” Her voice rose the moment her father burst through the door.

“What’s going on here?” Cattle baron Clinton David Morris stood towering over the two of them, a look of intent in his mean, spiteful eyes.

She pushed the man away who tried to steal a kiss, his hand still on her arm. When she pulled away, the material on the sleeve tore.

“It won’t work, Father. You have no witnesses. Besides, I’m leaving Saturday morning.”

Gaither Jones righted his jacket, swiping at a red splotch on his cheek where she had slapped his face. “She insists she is going to marry someone else.” His voice was pitched high, his eyes angry.

Clinton David held up a hand. “Silence!”

Olivia knew the moment Gaither Jones came for a visit so early this morning, something was in the air. She had been determined to avoid him at all functions for the last two weeks. Even when her parents invited him for supper twice, she had pleaded a headache and stayed in her room.

Now, her parents were planning her demise. She wasn’t as simple minded as they thought she was.

This was the last straw! Thank the good Lord her own plans

were in place.

“Father, I know you planned this out. Oh, I hear the doorbell. Who would be calling this time of day? Perhaps someone who would be a witness to this horrendous and evil-minded set-up?” His plans were so obvious it made her skin crawl. There was no way he’d get away with this!

Miriam, one of the house maids, arrived at the door of the parlor, an older lady in tow. “Why, Mrs. Marley. How nice of you to come calling. I’m afraid we are dealing with a family matter at the moment,” her father said, then lifted the older woman’s gloved hand.

The white-haired woman gave him a slow smile. “It was your lovely wife who requested my presence. Is she here? We have plans for a small luncheon to discuss her donation to a most deserving, worthy cause.”

“I am here, Mrs. Marley.”

Olivia’s adopted mother swept into the room like a queen, her wide skirts swooshing about. Olivia honestly rolled her eyes. “Mother, you’re out of bed already?”

Her adopted mother gave her a stare that would rattle most people. Except Olivia wasn’t most people. She was the scorned daughter who was about to be set up by her own parents.

Olivia was having none of this. They didn’t know she had already agreed to marry someone else. They were about to find out. It would certainly spoil all these premeditated plans.

Her mother stood by her side. “What is going on in this

room, young lady? Why are your cheeks red? Your hair is askew? What have you been doing?"

"Hello, Mother."

Celia Morris gasped when she noticed a small tear on Olivia's sleeve. "You have been behind these closed doors with Mr. Jones for the last forty minutes without a chaperone!"

"No, Mother. Father was right behind us, trying to set me up. You know it because you both planned this very thing to happen. I'm sure Mr. Jones is basking in his role also."

Gaither Jones hung his head. "I'm sorry, sir. Ma'am. Forgive me. Your daughter is so beautiful, I couldn't help myself. I had to kiss her. She refused at first."

Olivia laughed. "At first? I refused, period. He is a snake!"

She took a step back. Four sets of eyes watched her. She wasn't going to feel one bit guilty. Not for this. The visiting woman looked horrified.

Mrs. Marley's hand went to her throat. "If these two were left alone and were slightly intimate, no matter who is to blame, I insist you take action immediately, Mr. Morris." The older woman's eyes flashed with righteous indignation.

Her father tried to hang his head as well. Olivia almost laughed when he nodded in agreement. "Very well. We will arrange a wedding on Saturday afternoon."

Olivia kept silent. It didn't matter what they arranged. She waited until her adopted mother walked Mrs. Marley from the room. She turned on her father and Gaither. "It won't

work. I'm due to leave here to marry as a mail order bride."

" A what?"

"What?"

Both men looked surprised, as she had known they would. "It's true. I've agreed to marry a man named Wesley Young, who owns a farm, by the way. I'll be leaving here in a few days. You can't stop me."

Her father and Gaither glanced at each other before his deep voice called out to the help. In a moment, Charles and Mary Jane arrived. "Take my daughter to her room and lock the door."

Olivia glared at him. "Lock the door? You can't lock me inside my own room!"

The two hired help hesitated until her father swore and demanded they take her by force if need be. "Do not let her out until you hear from me!"

"You can't do this, Father."

He turned.

The man she had known as her father smiled and raised a brow. "I can and I have. You will be married come Saturday to Gaither Jones. I've paid your way since the moment you got off that damn train and now you will pay your dues."

His cruel words rang in her ears as Charles reached out, his eyes apologetic and took her arm. She struggled but his grip was too strong. She was about to pull away and run for her life when she realized it would do no good. No one was able to help her. They would do her father's bidding.

It didn't matter.

She'd get away before Saturday.

One way or another.

The door closed.

The lock clicked as she rattled the knob to no avail.

Olivia ran across the room to the veranda, flinging open the door. She was on the second floor, it wasn't too much of a drop if she needed to escape. Peering over the rail, her heart sank when she noticed two footmen standing below. Her father had already placed guards in case she tried to climb down the balcony posts. They would do whatever they were told if she tried to escape, dragging her back through the front door and back here once more.

Closing her eyes, Olivia's head began to pound even more now. There had to be a way to escape from this nonsense. There was no way she'd marry that horrible man who resembled her father in every way. No, she wanted a new life, a new way of living with Wesley Young, the man she had promised to marry. She knew if she could only get to Mr. Young's farm, she'd be rid of her father's hold on her life.

Since there was no way to send word to him, and he was too far away to rescue her, she'd have to rescue herself.

If only she knew how!

She had to come up with a plan to foil her father. And, it seemed apparent her mother was in on this as well. Frustrated beyond all doubt, Olivia had always felt as if she were on the outside with this family. So had Cal, it was why

he had left. Now, it was her turn to get far away.

Didn't they both realize marrying her to a cruel, heartless man would not stop her from wanting more out of life? She'd never conform to their way of living, of lying and hurting those who got in their way. Never! There was no doubt in Olivia's mind she had to flee for her own life.

Olivia sat on the edge of her bed wringing her hands. She had to come up with a good plan. Several hours later, after refusing the noon meal, she had retired to her bed, claiming a headache. Her father had stopped by to see if she had changed her mind.

She heard the click of the key in the door. Sitting upright, she was about to get off the edge of the bed when he walked in, the key to her door dangling from his finger. "Have you given my proposal any further thought?"

She laughed. "Proposal? You make it sound as if you are giving me a choice." She no longer cared to call him father. Ever again. What father would do this to his own daughter?

"The Dallas Ranchers Ball is tomorrow evening. I won't expect you to be there since you will be here, locked away unless you agree to marry Mr. Jones."

She crossed her arms. "Do you think I care about the ball? The cost of one ball gown alone will feed a dozen orphans for a year."

Clinton David growled. "That's nonsense! If you think this is a game, you are wrong. If Gaither reveals what he knows about this family, my word will no longer mean anything in

the business world."

"Most people know exactly who you are. I would not let it concern you any longer."

He came closer. "That is where you are wrong. I plan to invest my profits in petroleum. I've bought up several parcels of land where it is said the oil flows in trenches once it is taken from the ground. Only those with enough money to invest will see a profit. I plan to be the one to bring Texas oil to life. You will not ruin this for me."

So now she knew the reason why he was determined to win. It was always about profit. About making himself richer. She laughed even though she was scared. A man of determination like him would do whatever it takes. She was in his way. "Rockefeller owns over ninety percent of the nation's oil. How can you compete with him?"

He laughed. "The only reason he owns the most is because no one has tried to stand up to him. I have enough money now to invest in oil. This part of Texas is going to be booming. You wait and see."

He turned away from her then stopped at the door. Without glancing her way, he asked, "What have you decided, Olivia? Will you be reasonable and agree to this marriage or will it be forced upon you?"

She spit on the floor, a most unladylike move. "Go to Hades!"

He turned with more than anger in his eyes. There was a level of evil she had known existed but it was never

addressed towards her, until now.

The dark, empty orbs frightened her. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them a mere second later, it was to see the door slam shut, the sound of a click locking her in once again.

She threw her head back, staring at the ceiling. *Lord, what have I done wrong to deserve this? I cannot marry a man who blackmails my own father, another man of evil doings. Help me, Lord, help me to escape. You do want me to help orphans, don't you?*

She wanted to feel ashamed for trying to bargain with God and yet, she knew if she were to ever make a difference in the world, it would not be done here. She felt led to start up her own ranch or farm for orphans, it was buried deep in her soul. If the desire was there, it was because she was being led to do so. God certainly would not steer her in the wrong direction.

No, if she were right, and she felt in her own heart she was, then a way for her to escape would arise.

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Olivia sat at her dressing table, patiently waiting for the house to empty. The commotion had finally stopped as her parents left for the Ball. It was a big deal, this Ball. Once a year, the cattleman and other prominent members of Dallas society gave large donations to the city. Everyone important

in her father's eyes would be there tonight.

Her mother had tried to convince her to repent and agree to marry Gaither Jones, even trying to entice her with a beautiful ball gown she didn't think Olivia would be able to resist. Except Olivia was nothing like her adopted mother. Material possessions meant nothing. It was left hanging on the hook by her door when her mother stomped from the room, cursing her heathen soul.

After six in the evening, she heard the carriage wheels roll down the driveway towards the other side of town where the Ball was to be held. It didn't give her much time to escape. The train was leaving in one hour and she had to make it there on time.

Olivia ran across the room, making her way across the balcony to find only one footman standing guard. "Yoo-hoo!"

The guard pushed back the brim of his hat. "Ma'am?"

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" She leaned over as far as possible, her loose hair flowing down over the balcony. She moved about, the curls doing a dance of their own. Olivia kept her hair intact most days, holding it back in a bun because of it's full, thick waves. Now, she let it flow, on purpose.

A slow smile crossed her lips when she deliberately dropped the loose shawl from her shoulders. "Oh, dear," she cried out, pretending to reach for the material.

It fluttered to the ground, landing near the guards shiny, black boots. He gazed up at her one more time. "You've got

the devil inside you, Miss! I'm on to you. I'm not letting you off this property. I've got orders from Mr. Morris."

She sighed. He was stubborn. Loyal to a man who'd have him replaced in the blink of an eye. "I've decided to accept my father's proposal. I want to go to the Ball after all. But, there's no one left here to get me there. Except you."

He grinned. "Me? You want me to help you?" The guard pushed his hat further back, his eyes taking in her shoulders as they hung over the balcony ledge.

"You must, sir. I have to get to the Ball before it's too late for me. Please, won't you help me?"

He looked back and forth, leaned over as if someone were hiding in the front yard or behind a tree. "The carriage is gone, how do you expect to get there?"

"I thought perhaps you would take me."

"It isn't proper."

"Then ready my mare, Dreamer. You can ride along to make sure I go directly to the Ball."

"I don't know. Mr. Morris may not approve."

She leaned over even further. What did it take to change his mind? "Sir, if you don't take me to the Ball right now, when my father finds out I changed my mind and you didn't help get me there, he will no doubt fire you on the spot. You know his temper."

Everyone knew Mr. Morris was known for blowing his stack at times. He treated the help good and paid them well but when he was angry, no one's job was safe.

“I guess you have a good point. I’ll have two mares ready. Don’t be foolish. I’ll be right back.”

“What’s your name?”

“It’s Robert.”

“Thank you, Robert. You will single-handedly save the day.”

He nodded before hurrying to the stables.

Olivia was surprised he was so easy to convince. Yet, she knew her luck may run out at any time. Now, all she had to do was get to town and ease her way towards the railroad station. It was a shame she’d have to leave all her beautiful clothes behind. She rather liked wearing them.

She went to her bedroom door and began to pound on it with her fists. “Hilda? Where’s my supper? I’m hungry!”

Olivia ran back to the veranda doors, locking them before taking the key out and dropping it in the pocket of her dress.

When she turned back, Hilda had unlocked the door to her room, her cheeks pink, apologizing profusely. “I’m sorry, Olivia. Here’s your tray.”

“Set it at my dressing table.” Olivia had everything at the ready. Now as long as it all worked out the way she planned, no one would be the wiser until she was long gone. “Sit down for a moment, Hilda. I have something to give you.”

The sweet maid set down the tray. “I can’t possibly sit in your seat,” she told her.

“I insist. Go on.”

Hilda reluctantly sat. She looked so uncomfortable.

“Go on, pick up the box.”

Olivia made her way to a small bag sitting against the wall. She picked it up, placing the bag behind her. Hilda had never noticed. She was still staring at the box. Olivia had gifted her with other small favors before so it wasn’t a surprise. Yet, the maid always acted as if it were.

“Hilda, just pick it up. I want to thank you for all you do.” Olivia set her bag by the door. She went to the dressing table where Hilda sat, the box now in her hand. Hilda hadn’t pocketed the key and it wasn’t in her hand. Olivia knew it had to still be in the door. Good. It was going as planned.

When Hilda opened the box, she gasped. “These are so expensive! I can’t take them.”

“You have no choice. Go on, put them on.”

Hilda didn’t hesitate. She struggled to get one earring out of the box, concentrating so hard she never noticed when Olivia slipped out the door. “I’m sorry, Hilda!” She hated leaving her in a locked room but at least there was food. Olivia even had chocolates brought up earlier in case her parents were gone most of the night. Besides, as soon as Robert found out he was tricked, she was sure he’d be back to let Hilda out of the locked room. No one would blame her. They would blame the despised heathen child.

For some reason what she was about to do gave her a sense of power. Knowing she was so close to freedom kept her moving down the stairs.

She tip-toed to her father’s study even though no one was

there to hear. Most of the hired help had gone for the day, leaving Hilda to keep an eye on Olivia. Since her parents thought she was locked away in her room, there was no need for more than the maid and one guard.

How they underestimated her! She stood there, looking at the family portrait above her father's desk. Her brother's face stood out, stiff and unsmiling. The head of the family, his eyes dark with evil intent, stared down at her from the portrait. Her mother's eyes, distant, loathing, seemed to watch her actions. She just wanted out of here but there was one more thing to do.

She pushed her shoulders back, lifted a chin and pulled open a corner of the heavy wooden frame. Constructed behind the portrait in a large hole in the wall was the family safe.

Olivia knew the numbers by heart. Even her father didn't know she had the combination. She had often sat in the chair on the opposite side of the desk being lectured by him for something she had done. While he ranted on and on, she paid more attention to the way he turned his hand, stopping on certain numbers before moving the lock in the opposite direction. She had trained herself to hear how many clicks until the next one. Time and time again, she had focused on the numbers to keep his hatred out of her head until one night, out of curiosity, she tried to open the safe herself.

It had worked. She had guessed the right numbers. That had been years ago, when she was so small. Luckily, he never

had a need to change the numbers.

Click, click, click. Sucking in a deep breath, her hand clutched the metal handle, turning it back.

The safe popped opened. Inside, there were piles of paperwork. She had made her father write a promissory note when she was eleven. She had remembered it well. One for her and one for Cal to give them their freedom when they were eighteen. She remembered the conversation well.

"I want it written in ink."

Her father had laughed. "You've got to be kidding! I told you in Pittsburgh as long as you never say a word where you came from, I'll give you and your brother enough money when you turn eighteen. My word is good enough for men of high caliber."

"I'm not men of high caliber. I'm eleven."

Cal had stood beside her, nodding. "You have my word that I will never speak of this again but we'd like it written down."

Olivia had been so afraid he'd laugh in their faces. Instead, their adopted father quickly scribbled a note for each of them, promising a set amount when they turned eighteen as long as the secret was kept intact. He never wrote down what that secret was.

"We will call it a secret only the three of us know about."

In her naivety, Olivia whispered, "Mother knows too, I think she needs to sign a note."

"Let's keep your mother out of this. I want the two of you to sign as well."

After they both signed, the notes were placed and locked away in his safe.

Until now. She wanted the notes in case he tried to come after her. Quickly shuffling through the many papers there, Olivia smiled when she hit pay dirt. She stuffed the yellowed envelope deep in her pocket.

Stacks of cash took up over half of the safe. Olivia wanted her share that was promised to her but she wasn't a thief. She almost reached out for the money but then reached in her pocket and placed a rose scented envelope in the center instead.

There was no goodbye note inside. It was cash, for the fair-market value to purchase her beloved mare, and a note stating such. The money was from her monthly allowance she had saved. She didn't want anything from her parents. She was taking the clothes on her back and a small bag, along with Dreamer. Then she shut the safe and fixed the frame so no one ever knew she was there.

Olivia walked out the front door, her head held high. When she got halfway down the walkway, Robert was coming toward her. "You should not be outside on your own!"

He didn't look too happy.

"It's fine. We better hurry, I know Father will be so happy when I do show up. He's wanted me to agree and now I see the error of my ways."

"I hope you are right. Are you wearing that?"

Olivia had worn one of her better dresses. It was by no means a ball gown. "Mother has my gown at the ball. You are to take me to the side entrance. She told me if I changed my

mind that is where I should go."

Robert believed her lies. Probably because she had never lied to him or anyone else there, ever. He helped her get on Dreamer even though she was perfectly capable. She had kept a small bag hidden in her skirts and was glad when he hadn't noticed. Two plain dresses were stuffed inside, along with a few toiletries.

The main street was fairly busy this evening. Robert took the lead, ordering Olivia to stay behind him. She had been hoping he'd take the lead so she was able to slip away. The moment she read Texas & Pacific Railway on a wooden sign, she whispered to Dreamer to slow even more. They were getting closer to the ballroom. And her freedom.

Olivia took in a deep breath. It was now or never. "Dreamer." She leaned low over the horse's mane and whispered in her ear. "It's time to dance."

Dreamer began to shuffle her hoofs just as Olivia pulled free the small bag from inside her skirts. She would have to travel with the clothes on her back but at least she'd be away from here. Just as she came upon two young boys standing on the street corner under a gas light, she showed them her bag.

"Come on, girl, dance for me!" Dreamer lifted her hoof, then side-stepped like Olivia had taught her, her rump almost bumping into the two young boys. One of them reached for her bag and she let it slide from her fingers, knowing they'd steal anything that came their way. She hated to use street urchins like this but had faith they were smart enough to hide

down some darkened ally out of sight. She remembered how it was so many years ago.

When this was over, she vowed to come back and get those two boys off the streets.

“Stop! They stole my things!”

Robert turned so quick she wasn’t sure in that moment if the boys would get away. She was desperate. She pointed in their direction just as they turned the corner. “There! They stole my purse!”

Robert didn’t hesitate. “Get to the ballroom, now!” He was a guard, a man determined to be loyal to his employer. He saw Olivia in stress and pushed his own mare to a gallop after the street kids. The moment he rounded the corner, Olivia dug her heels in and the two tore off in the opposite direction. Olivia’s hat flew off in her haste while Dreamer rode hard and fast towards the train station.

It was almost as if the mare knew where to go. Olivia leaned in, letting Dreamer take the lead. “Come on, girl, one more block to go.”

At the station, she didn’t take the time to wait for someone to help her off. She slid from Dreamer, placing her dear horse in the hands of one of the porters, a man she had seen before on occasion when they had traveled by rail. “Can you place her in one of the stalls. How long until we leave?”

“Less than five minutes. You best get moving.”

“Thank you. Are you riding on this train today, sir?”

“Yes, ma’am. Now, hurry.”

The porter hurried to get the animal loaded up. She was relieved and grateful he remembered her from the times she rode the train in her father's private Pullman car. At least he'd be on-board when everyone came looking for her. That way he wasn't able to point her out.

Olivia watched as Dreamer disappeared. She closed her eyes, blinked, lifted her skirts and ran to the small window in the lobby. "Can you please exchange Saturday's ticket for today?"

When she had said ticket in hand, Olivia's fingers held onto it so tight she wasn't about to let go. Not for anything!

She settled in a seat behind a large couple in case Robert caught up and looked in the car. Just in case, she slid lower in her seat, hidden from view.

When the whistle blew, and the chug, chug, chug of the wheels began to sound, she watched the city go by when the steam cleared.

Tears ran unchecked down her face. She was free.

Chapter 3

Wesley was summoned to Wichita Falls two days before his marriage to the mail order bride. Miss Addie wanted to see him immediately. An eerie feeling struck him up one side and down the other.

Was Olivia Morris going to jilt him even before they got to the alter? He crumbled up the note one of the hands from the White ranch gave him earlier. He was going to take his good old sweet time showing up. Wesley was as stubborn as the day is long. Why hurry to get there for bad news?

He didn't want to tell his ma there was a glitch in their plans yet. She would be so disappointed in him if he didn't bring a bride home. He squared his shoulders to face the music. He had never kept anything from his mother. At least nothing of this importance.

All through his growing up years he had worked hard to keep the sadness from flowing across her face. Many times he watched her staring out to the horizon, a frown upon her beautiful face, or a worried look in her eyes. He had been determined every time he saw her like that to make sure he did everything in his power to keep her happy, to make her smile. It was why they all thought he was so happy-go-lucky.

Wesley walked toward the farmhouse where she was preparing supper. The more he thought about her, he realized

the far-a-way, solemn look in her eyes hadn't been there for a long, long time. He wondered if it had anything to do with the preacher from Coopers Ridge.

The good preacher had come calling several times in the past few months. He told Wesley he was calling on the Widow Young as a courtesy from the church. Wesley had become suspicious when the preacher looked at his ma with a certain kindness and longing in his eyes.

Lately, though, the preacher hadn't come around. His ma seemed short in temper and she went off to bed earlier than usual. Even though the faraway longing was no longer there, Wesley wondered if that had anything to do with the preacher?

He sighed, opened the front door and let the screen door slam shut. "Ma?"

She was at the table peeling apples when she looked up and smiled. "Wesley? What is it?"

"One of the hands from next door brought me a note from Miss Addie."

"Oh? What did she want?"

She tried to seem calm but Wesley noticed she was peeling the skin of the apple more frantically than normal. He'd best get to the thick of things. "She wants to see me right away and didn't say why."

He sat across from her. She stopped peeling and set the knife and apple down. Wiping her hands on a rag, she nodded. "Then you best be on your way."

He took her hand. “What if my bride isn’t going to show up? What if she changed her mind?”

Widow Young squeezed his hand and gave him a reassuring smile. “Oh, Wesley. If that is the case, there will be others. No need to hurry things along. Besides, you don’t know the whole story yet. It’s best to go find out.”

“I guess you’re right. Thanks, Ma. I worry about you. You’ve been a good mother to me and Russell. He’s happily married now and you have a sweet daughter-in-law who loves you. I want to make you happy, too. You deserve it.”

She stood and gave him a big hug. “Wesley, you always worried more for me than necessary. The idea of a mail order bride is to make you happy, not me. My own happiness is watching the two of you get settled. Now, go on and find out what Miss Addie wants. It may be good news. Maybe your bride arrived early!”

She peered at his work clothes, which were dusty from working on the farm. He followed her gaze and laughed. “You may be right, Ma. I’ll put on some decent britches and a new shirt before I go.”

“That’s my boy.” Widow Young turned back to her work at hand, giving him a reassuring smile first.

Twenty minutes later, Wesley was cleaned up and on his way. Since Wichita Falls was not even an hours ride away, he took his time, enjoying the day. He tried not to seem nervous. After all, if he were being jilted by a mail order bride, he’d just order a new one.

What will it be like to have someone there day and night? He hoped and prayed she'd be sweet and loving. He wasn't about to tolerate anything else. As he rode along the trail to Wichita Falls, Wesley took out a hanky to wipe the sweat from his brow. He was nervous.

Was he really prepared for this?

He could easily turn the mare towards home and forget the whole idea. Yet, he was curious as to why Miss Addie wanted him two days early. He had to see this through.

Wesley flung back his head and laughed. He'd always been an adventurer. Why wouldn't this be any different. He dug his heels in. "Giddy 'up!" he told his horse. "It's time to find out what this is all about."

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Olivia sat in the parlor of Miss Addie's boarding house, hands on her lap, patiently waiting for Mr. Young. She had paced back and forth for thirty minutes before Miss Addie told her she was being ridiculous and to sit down and be patient. That thought made her laugh. Olivia had not been a patient child or young adult.

She basically had every one of her needs met by the staff in her father's house. They didn't hesitate to do her bidding when she asked. Even though Olivia liked to do things for herself, if she tried, there was a staff member standing by at all times. Sometimes, it worked on a raw nerve. She had

snapped at them at times, giving her a label of being unruly.

Now, here she was, those days over. This new adventure was making her doubly nervous. She closed her eyes, trying to contain her anxiety. What if Mr. Young refused to marry her. What if she wasn't what he wanted? How will she be able to take care of orphans, her life's dream? It was the reason she took this risk. Without her father's promised money, she had nothing if he refused to marry.

Miss Addie sat down beside her. She took both Olivia's hands in her own. "Dear Olivia, you are extremely nervous. Take a deep breath and relax."

Olivia tried, to no avail. "Why isn't he here yet? You've sent the note three hours ago."

"The farm is almost an hour from here. It may have taken the ranch hand a long time to find Wesley. Their farm is rather large, he may have been out in the pasture working. Please, try to calm down and be patient. What has you so anxious?"

Miss Addie seemed like a trusting sort. Olivia had learned not to trust anyone over the years because of the way her parents had broken every promise they'd made. But, this woman seemed different. Olivia relished in the older woman's caring demeanor. "You know when I turned up here on the train last evening, I was not completely honest when I told you I accidentally had the wrong date to leave."

Miss Addie smiled knowingly. "Of course, dear. No one makes that kind of mistake easily. Who are you running

from?”

“My father and mother had me locked in my room, but it’s worse. They were going to force me to marry someone I despise after I told them I had chosen to marry Mr. Young.”

“Oh, you poor dear. Don’t worry about a thing. You are of age and they cannot come here and take you back by force. Do they even know where you are?”

She shrugged. “I did tell them Mr. Young’s name. I don’t know if they care enough to look for me. The thing is, I was promised a sum of money to keep a family secret. My brother and I kept our mouths shut for all these years. My brother Calvin received his money when he turned of age last year. He was allowed to walk out the door. I doubt he’ll ever return. I tried to do the same thing and failed.”

The matchmaker nodded her head as if she were familiar with these kinds of manipulating situations. “I imagine someone found out about the little secret and is blackmailing your parents?”

Olivia, amazed at her perception, nodded. “How in the world did you know?”

“Perhaps I’ve been at this matchmaking business far too long. The stories I hear are not much different from one bride to the next. No need to worry, you are safe here. If they come looking for you, I will not tell them where you are unless you want me to.”

Her words did make Olivia feel a little better. At least she didn’t have to worry about them causing trouble, if they even

cared. “I won’t hide from them. The reason I’m so nervous is the fact Mr. Young has thirty days to decide if he wants to continue our marriage. What if he doesn’t? I’ll have nowhere to go, no money in my possession. I’m so scared.”

There it was, the truth was out. Even though she had a dream to take in orphan children, her worst fear was being alone, without anyone. No money or home, nothing. Her brother was working on a ranch somewhere in Montana. That place seemed so far away. If he knew of her plight, she knew without a doubt he’d come to get her, but then his dream would be ruined. She’d never do that to him.

Miss Addie took both her hands and placed them on her cheeks, forcing Olivia to look right in her eyes. There was a confidence, a promise there Olivia wanted to believe in. “Miss Olivia Morris, you are a strong, independent woman. Look at what you’ve done, taking this journey here alone. You’ve arranged your own escape. Never, ever, underestimate yourself. No matter what life brings you, remember that you can overcome anything. Anything at all.”

“Thank you,” Olivia whispered, choked up at the fierceness in the older woman’s voice. She nodded, took a deep breath and sat up straighter. “I’m ready. I can do this and no matter what happens, I can make it on my own if I have to.”

Miss Addie gave her a hug. “You won’t have to. I feel it in my soul.”

Olivia hugged her back. “I sure hope so.”

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To say Wesley wasn't nervous when he stood in front of Miss Addie's door was an understatement. How in the world was he going to react if his mail order bride had taken a notion to cancel?

Guess it was time to find out. His knuckles tapped on the solid wooden door. Wesley removed his hat, determined to see this through. It wasn't the end of the world.

Not yet.

The door swung open in Miss Addie style. "Good afternoon, Mr. Young. Please, do come in."

"Ma'am," he greeted her, taking the first step inside. It wasn't nearly as bad as he thought. She didn't appear to show any angst about her person.

"You may place your hat there." She pointed to a rack on the wall beside the door. She got right to the point, speaking softly. "There has been a change of plans."

His face fell. "I assumed so when I read the note."

Miss Addie placed a soft, ageing hand on his sleeve. "I'm afraid it isn't what you believe. Trust me."

For some reason unknown to him, Wesley did. "I've been wondering the whole way here why you have called for me all of a sudden."

Miss Addie smiled. "Your bride is here. In my parlor. She took an early train and here she is." The older woman didn't give him any time to compose himself as she took a firm grip

on his sleeve, causing him to follow her in to the parlor.

Miss Morris sat on the edge of the settee, her hands clutched in her lap. She was wearing a beautiful gown that would be too fancy for his farm. Her blonde hair was swept back in an immaculate bun and when she turned towards him, he noticed her pale cheeks and long neck had never been touched by the sun. How would she fare, such a delicate creature? He tried to be practical but when she gave him a smile, her face opened up, causing him to smile back. Those beautiful blue eyes with long, dark lashes looked at him in expectation.

Was she as nervous as he?

Long, dark lashes blinked several times. She stood, her hands clutched together. Then he watched as she transformed herself. Pulling her shoulders back, this beautiful woman stepped towards him, holding her arm out as if she were in some fancy ballroom.

Stunned at her beauty, Wesley stood frozen until Miss Addie made a noise beside him. He shook his head, taking a step forward, reaching out his own hand until her soft one was engulfed between his own. “Miss Morris,” he told her, his voice sounding louder than usual.

“Hello, Mr. Young. I hope it isn’t an inconvenience to have arrived a few days early. I feel I owe you an explanation.”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I’m relieved you are here. I was concerned the whole way here you had changed your mind.”

She laughed then, her cheeks turning pink as her eyes twinkled in delight. “I’ve no intention of changing my mind. It’s you who worries me. You have thirty days to throw me back.”

He laughed. Relieved she was so easy to talk to. She didn’t seem so high-faluting or out of touch of the real world the way some women of her status behaved. Perhaps this was a match made in heaven. Miss Addie did seem to know how to match up people. “I have no intention of throwing you back,” he told her, unable to hide his grin.

“I’ve spoken to Reverend Connors early this morning. He is prepared to perform the ceremony now instead of Saturday.”

Wesley held out his arm. “I’d say we are as prepared as ever. Are you ready to be Mrs. Young?”

His bride-to-be tilted her head slightly to one side, staring at him with her beautiful blue eyes before placing her hand on his arm. “Indeed, Mr. Young. I am ready.”

Chapter 4

Because he had rearranged his schedule, Reverend Connors was in a hurry to finish the ceremony. “I now pronounce you man and wife and you may kiss your bride.” He closed the bible and moved away the moment Olivia and Wesley’s lips met in that infinitive kiss.

Olivia’s eyes shot open when Wesley kissed her. His mouth was so soft and he moved them in a way that stirred something deep inside of her. Was this the thing her brother had warned her about? Cal had often told her never to let a man kiss her again if she didn’t feel something towards him. She’d know if he was the right one if there was a fluttering in her belly. She had blushed at the time but always took advice from him since he was always so knowledgeable in affairs of the heart.

Her new husband took a step back. “Mrs. Young, I believe we are official now.”

She gazed at Wesley. “You may call me Olivia. I believe your entitled to that now.”

He walked alongside her as they left the church. “Thank you. Call me Wesley. Mr. Young makes me sound so old.”

“You are old. Almost ancient,” she teased, her soft laughter flowing from her throat. When had she smiled and laughed like this? It had been a long time.

He moved closer, leaned in and whispered in her ear. “I’m not too old for you, Olivia.”

She blushed. Stopped in the middle of the wooden board walk and turned to him. “You, Wesley, are not a gentleman.”

He frowned. “I’m so sorry, Olivia. I meant it as a joke.”

She squeezed his arm. “So did I.”

His eyes twinkled again. “Would you care to have something to eat before we head back to the farm? There’s a small café down the street.”

“That sounds nice, thank you.”

At Jenna’s café, the proprietor made the two newlyweds feel welcome. “Congratulations on your wedding.”

Olivia looked up in surprise. “How did you know?” She was shocked. Last night when her train pulled up at the depot, the town had been fairly quiet. She found her way to Miss Addie’s boarding house after settling Dreamer at the local stable, and this morning it was decided by the matchmaker she’d send for Wesley right away. How did this woman in a small café know without church bells ringing or an advertisement in the newspaper?

Jenna smiled at her. “If it were Friday, I’d never have known since I’ve only been working part-time since the baby’s been born. Leila and I have an arrangement. That’s my sister-in-law. We take turns running the café now.”

Olivia nodded as if she was supposed to know who these people are. Wesley watched her, not commenting either way. “I see. Well, that does not explain how you knew of our

marriage."

Jenna patted her arm. "This is a small town. By the time you stepped onto Miss Addie's porch, half of the folks in town knew you were here."

In the world she grew up in, her father's world, she was used to discrepancy. No one spoke of other people's business, especially not in a public café. Actually, Olivia never had been in such a small eatery like this before. It was time she became familiar with her new surroundings and people. If she were to be accepted here as more than a rich man's daughter, then she needed to learn to adapt. A grateful smile crossed her lips. "Thank you for educating me on small town living. I'm thankful to learn whatever I can."

Jenna took their orders, bringing a coffee for Wesley and a cup of tea for Olivia. "Thank you."

"Would you care to see my baby?" Jenna asked.

For some reason, Olivia felt as if she wanted to do more than show her the baby.

"Of course, if you'll excuse me, Wesley."

Wesley stood while she went into the kitchen area with Jenna. The moment she saw the cradle in the far corner of the kitchen, Olivia felt drawn to the child. She loved babies. Leaning over, she placed a hand on the child's body, careful not to wake it. "Beautiful," she whispered. "You must be very happy."

"I am. I'll come right to the point since your husband is out there fidgeting, wondering what we are talking about. I want

to welcome you and let you know the dress is not suitable for life on a farm."

"I already know this," Olivia said, surprised she'd bring it up the first time they met.

"I'm telling you for a certain reason. We've been trying to raise money for a school. Right now, the church is also our school. We plan to have an auction next month so if you don't plan to wear that fancy dress, I know of several fine ladies who will be attending our auction. We can always use donations."

"Certainly. I'm glad you didn't rip the dress right off my back!" Olivia and Jenna laughed. She wasn't able to speak so boldly in her circle but here, she was free to say whatever came to mind. It was a new and satisfying feeling.

"I knew you'd understand. Soon, the ladies of Wichita Falls will hold a meeting in Lily and Ben's hotel. You can come, too, if you'd like, meet all of us who chose to marry the men of Wichita Falls and beyond."

"I will be here, you can count on me. By the way, has the Orphan Train ever stopped in Wichita Falls?"

Jenna contemplated for a moment. "I don't recall but then I wasn't looking for it. Why do you ask?"

"It's a long story, perhaps one I may share next week. I better get back if what you say is true about what's happening in the dining room with my new husband."

Jenna laughed. "I notice more things than most people and your husband's eyes were boring into our backs as we left the

room. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Back in the dining room, Wesley welcomed her back, placing a protective hand over hers. She was quite impressed with the town and people so far. "Jenna is a lovely lady," Olivia mentioned.

"She will introduce you to the others."

"Others?"

"Mail order brides of Wichita Falls."

"That sounds like a cult."

He grinned. "In a way it is, taking over our town and the countryside. Life has been changed for many with Miss Addie's matchmaking skills."

"I'm sure. Well, let's have a toast to our Miss Addie. If it weren't for her, we may not have met."

Wesley lifted his cup of coffee while she raised the tea cup. Jenna brought their dinner just then, and left quietly. After some time, she noticed he wasn't touching his plate.

"Is there something wrong?" She also put her fork down and gave him full attention.

"I want to make sure we are clear on the rules."

"Rules?" Was he talking about their thirty day rule?

He nodded. "Yes, I understand we will be given thirty days to consider each other for this marriage even though we've officially had the ceremony."

"I believe you are too kind with your words, Wesley. The truth is we have thirty days to decide if this marriage is worth our while. Unless, we consummate the marriage then the

decision is out of our hands." He seemed embarrassed now to discuss things but she wasn't about to let him off the hook. He was the one who mentioned this first. It was a touchy subject in her circle and yet it seemed so natural talking with him.

He tried to frown but his eyes lit up. She liked to look at those dark eyes, full of mischief and laughter. "I suppose we need to behave ourselves then. I apologize for my remark earlier."

"No need. I quite enjoyed your teasing."

"You did? I'm glad. Let me tell you about our home. We will be living in the main house with my mother. Don't worry, she is a lovely woman. My brother lives on the property as well in a small cabin he built before he got married. Naomi is his wife. Hopefully the two of you hit it off. She helps Ma with meals and will be happy to have another woman on the farm, I'm sure."

Olivia was glad there was going to be others there. She wasn't quite sure how she would fair living with him alone. Now that she knew the rest of his family was close by, it made her feel a whole lot better. "I'm sure we will get along fine."

After their meal, he took her back to Miss Addie's to collect her things. "I'll be right back with a buggy."

"My mare, Dreamer, will need to come along. I brought her from home."

"I'll pay the bill and tie her to the buggy. Don't worry."

While he was gone, she went to find Miss Addie to say goodbye. The older woman was sitting at her table, alone, having a cup of tea in a tiny porcelain cup. She smiled when Olivia entered the room. “Getting ready to leave for the farm?”

Olivia nodded. “I was wondering, well, I have an issue.”

Miss Addie stood. “Do we need to go somewhere private to discuss this?”

Olivia looked around. No one was near them so she shook her head. “No, I have been asked by Jenna from the café to donate my dress to a charity event next week. I was wondering, if, well, if you happen to know of somewhere I may buy an ordinary dress?”

“Follow me, dear. I have the perfect solution. Miss Campbell was the same size as you. She left all of her luggage behind when she ran off with a gold miner. Claimed she didn’t need all the clothes in her carpet bag. I was to donate it to the church. Now I know the reason why I hadn’t gotten to that yet.”

Olivia followed her upstairs as Miss Addie opened the door to a small closed off area at the end of the hall. “Here you are, then.” She handed Olivia a tattered carpet bag.

“There are a few dresses inside, along with some incidentals. You are welcome to the lot. Miss Campbell won’t be returning for them.”

“May I change now and leave this gown with you to donate? No sense in carting it all over the countryside.”

Miss Addie agreed. “That’s a wise choice. You are very practical,” she told her. Olivia felt ten feet tall at her compliment. She followed her mentor into an empty room to change before Wesley returned. Miss Addie gave her a hand, complimenting her on the expensive material.

“This dress alone will be worth a small fortune.”

Olivia agreed. “Jenna seemed to know it, also.”

Miss Addie grinned. “Miss Jenna came from a prominent family in Philadelphia. I’m certain she’s worn a similar gown in her time.”

“I’ll be happy to be rid of it if it causes others to look upon me as a rich, selfish person. I’ve always tried to help others, especially those in need of a home. Have you heard of the Orphan Train, Miss Addie?”

“Yes, I have. Now that we have plenty of women here, perhaps someday the train will stop along this route.”

Olivia smiled, then turned to the small mirror on the wall. The gown was a light cotton material, and it felt like heaven. No longer wearing heavy layers and so many ruffles was freeing. “It feels so much better without all those ruffles.”

“I’m sure it does. Your generosity will help plenty. We have quite the guest list with many prominent ladies from ranches as far as Dallas attending our auction. Thanks to our many brides, the connections they have to bring more wealth to our community is solid. I’m so happy you joined us.”

Olivia wanted to cry. No one had ever made her feel as welcome as this woman standing here in front of her did. She

twirled in a circle and gave Miss Addie a smile. “I promise to be an affluent member of this community. I am also hoping to adopt some orphans as soon as possible. I’m hoping my husband will agree.”

“What a pleasant surprise. Perhaps I can help with your request. I have several contacts in the big cities. I’ll speak with you next at our meeting. Now, I hear your husband. Are you ready?”

Olivia nodded. “Yes, I believe I am.” She checked herself in the mirror one more time. “What if he doesn’t find me attractive with this dowdy dress?”

“Oh, Olivia! I doubt he even noticed the dress you wore here.”

She certainly hoped so. With that thirty day clause hanging over their heads, he was able to send her back whenever he wanted if he deemed their marriage wouldn’t work out. She had to try her best to keep him happy. There was no way she’d ever return to her father’s home in Dallas.

On the ride back, Wesley stopped outside of town where a small waterfall cascaded into the creek. They sat there for some time, with its serene landscape calling out to all who went by.

“I always like to stop here for a few minutes when I’m in town,” Wesley told her. “I never get tired of hearing the sound of a waterfall.”

“It’s lovely.”

“I guess I’m trying to stall getting back to the farm. Once

there, everyone will show up to meet you."

Olivia turned to him. "Are you trying to keep me all to yourself, Wesley?" This man was so sweet. How had she gotten so lucky?

"I am. I saw one of the White ranch hands at the livery. He went ahead to tell my Ma I was bringing a bride home. The White's are my relatives, but that's another story. I'll fill you in sometime."

"Why not now? It sounds as if we have time."

He nodded, then helped her down from the buggy. "Come sit with me by the falls."

When they were settled, Wesley told her the story of the White and Young families. She wasn't prepared for such a tale. "Do you mean to tell me your step brothers knew all along about you and Russell and said nothing?"

He nodded. "We all kept quiet for Nora's sake. Ma was scorned for years and was so ashamed. Nora hated her because she thought my ma enticed her husband. That was the furtherest from the real truth. When Nora found out the truth, she immediately became my mother's closest friend. They've been inseparable since."

"At least it turned out to be a happy ending. I have to tell you something, Wesley."

"What is it?" He turned to her, taking her hand.

"I am also bringing a secret to this family. One I'm not inclined to speak of. Except, you are my husband and I feel as if I should tell you."

He stared intently at her. “You don’t have to say if you don’t want to.”

She shrugged and placed her other hand over the one holding hers. “I want to always be honest with you. This is a new life for me, far removed from what I am used to. You know I grew up in a wealthy household. My father adopted my brother Calvin and I. We were used to having everything done for us. Doing for myself now will take some getting used to. I hope you can tolerate me.”

Wesley frowned. “No need to worry, we can work on things together. I’m far from perfect.”

She reached up and touched his cheek. “You are too tolerant of me. What did I do to deserve you?”

Before she knew what happened, Wesley leaned in and placed his mouth over hers. She felt that flutter in her belly again and smiled.

He took a finger and lifted her chin. “What are you so amused about?”

“If I tell you, you may laugh.”

“I’d never laugh at you.”

“I feel a tiny flutter in my belly whenever you kiss me.”

He chuckled and raised a brow. “So do I.”

Olivia sighed. She closed her eyes. This was pure heaven. Without her father’s money the fear of what was to happen to her if Wesley had turned her away had lingered the whole way here. Now, she had no doubt her husband would accept her as a wife. “Do you still want to know about my secret?”

“Ah, yes. The secret. You’ve intrigued me so, I completely forgot. What is it? It can’t be that bad.”

“You must stop rubbing my hand first.”

Wesley shook his head but let go of her hand, not realizing how he affected her. “I’d say sorry but I’m not.”

She gave him a crooked grin. “Behave yourself, husband. Here’s my secret. My father, who is well known for his word and honor in his circle has lied to everyone for the last ten years. When we moved to Dallas from Pittsburgh no one knew my brother and I were his adopted children.”

“I don’t see how that is a big deal.”

“It is if you are a man of your word. He told everyone we were his natural born children, and even though we didn’t look like either one of them, no one every questioned his word. He had a name for himself and didn’t want us to ruin it by revealing his lies. He promised to pay my brother and I a large sum of money when we turned of age if we kept his secret. I even have the promissory note tucked away in case he tries anything.”

Wesley looked intrigued. “So did you or didn’t you keep the secret?”

She raised a hand to her heart. “I am a woman of honor. I also kept it quiet, as well as my brother. When he turned of age, Cal asked for his money and left home. When I asked, I was locked in my room to be forced to marry a man I despised.”

“I’m so sorry.” A nerve twitched at his neck. She reached

up and touched him there, trying to calm his demeanor. “How dare they treat you that way?” She heard the unrest in his voice, the anger for her.

“Calvin’s conversation with my adopted father was overheard by one of his business associates, Gaither Jones. He tried to blackmail my father.”

She nodded when Wesley guessed her father’s next move. “He was forcing you to marry him to keep silent? Not a good way to start a marriage, I’m afraid.”

“And none that I wanted. The man is exactly like my father. He’s horrid. I demanded my money so I could leave and the moment I did, he locked me up and then tried to set me up. I got away. Now, here I am.”

Wesley sighed. He let her hand go and leaned back in the grass. “Are you telling me the only reason you wanted to be a mail order bride is to get away from your family?”

He didn’t seem happy about her revealing secret. Oh dear, had she made a grave mistake telling Wesley?

Chapter 5

Had she done herself a grave disservice telling him about her family? He let go of her hand the moment she revealed her family secret. Was she doomed now? A fear so stark rolled over her in a way she had never felt before. What if he turned the buggy around and set her on Miss Addie's doorstep.

"Are you upset?"

"I'm not upset, a little puzzled perhaps."

She tried to stay calm. "I wanted a new life. One with children of my own and ones I may perhaps adopt from the orphan train."

"You said nothing about adopting orphans in your letter."

She figured he was avoiding the subject at hand. "Wesley, we need to discuss the reason I married you."

"I'm afraid it's too late. You already showed me by your actions."

Was there no convincing him he was jumping to conclusions? She hung her head. "Will you take me back to Miss Addie's then?"

"No, of course not. I want a wife. You'll do. I've agreed to marry so my mother can have more women on the farm to help her, if you want total honesty here."

She turned to look at him, shaking her head. "You can't

judge me for wanting to marry to get away from my father when all you are doing is marrying to appease your mother!" Olivia was no longer ashamed or angry at herself. This man was no better than she!

Wesley grinned. "I believe you are right, Olivia. We both have our own agenda for wanting this marriage. No sense in disappointing either one of us."

She crossed her arms. "Does this mean you are not angry at me?"

He leaned front, kissing her on the tip of her nose. "Of course not! I'll always wonder if your heart is mine since you basically wanted a sanctuary from your rich father."

She frowned. "That is a terrible way to put things."

"It's true, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. In a way. I do like you. You have a handsome smile, your eyes are deep and intense at times and you look at me as if you are interested in what I am saying."

He ran a finger along her jaw. "You are very observant since we only just met. I am interested in what you say. I like you, too. Let's try to make this marriage work and in thirty days we can always get an annulment if things don't work out."

She ran her fingers along his cheek. "I hope it doesn't come to an annulment."

"Because you have nowhere else to go?" Her husband was smart. Wesley stared at her, expecting honesty.

"Perhaps," she told him, deciding to always tell him the

truth. “I want you to know I grew up on lies. It’s time I take charge of my life. I promise you, husband, right here and now to always be honest with you as long as you do the same.”

He gave her a hug, then kissed her on the cheek. “You’ve got a deal. Now, if you want honesty, my leg is falling asleep and we need to get back to the farm before Ma sends out a search party.”

Olivia allowed him to help her up. “I’m a bit intimidated by your Ma. She sounds like she runs the farm.”

Wesley helped her into the buggy. He took her hand and kissed it, taking his time. “She does. I’ll do anything to keep her happy. She’s had a hard life raising my brother and me. Alone.”

The two didn’t speak much for some time. Olivia took in everything he said. She was worried that his ma would be like her father and refuse to allow her to help others. Her heart and soul was determined to help the lost children from the Orphan Trains. How was she going to accomplish her heart’s desire if his ma stood in the way?

“It won’t be long,” Wesley told her, throwing a meaningful smile her way. “You’ve gotten awfully quiet.”

She turned to him, her hands clasped in her lap. “I want to adopt poor children from the Orphan Train.”

Wesley slowed the buggy. “You’ve told me this desire of yours earlier in our conversation at the waterfalls. Although, you didn’t mention it in your letter. I’m open to anything that will help children. I haven’t given the Orphan Train much

consideration since it has never come close to our doorstep."

"It is something I've always wanted to do."

"Our farm has several families living there. My brother and his wife, my mother and now you and I. We don't have a large operation but if we take in others, it has to be discussed and agreed upon by everyone."

Was he saying there was a chance? She had to convince him before they got to the farm where it sounded as if his mother made most of the decisions. If what she was hearing about Widow Young was correct, his ma did not like to disappoint her boys. So, if Wesley is convinced the Orphan Train is a good thing, wouldn't she want to do everything in her power to make him happy and agree to Olivia's idea?

The thoughts whirled in her head like a tornado furiously hurling dust and debris on the prairie. She needed him to know the rest of the story. "Wesley."

He turned to watch her. "What is it? Do you want me to slow down?"

They had been moving along at quite a fast speed until she spoke his name. "I was one of the children from the Orphan Train. My brother and I."

He stopped the buggy. "You? Are you telling me that's how your rich father adopted you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so. My brother and I were homeless. I don't know who my real parents are and neither does Cal. As long as I can recall, we had each other. He took care of me until we were forced into an orphanage and they

sent us on the train."

Wesley shook his head. "I can't imagine having no home, nowhere to go. I guess you've taught me that I'm a lucky man." Wesley took her in his arms, holding her. He let her go but stared into her eyes. "If you want to adopt children less fortunate then we'll find a way to get the train here. Or, we'll go to wherever it is. I promise you, Olivia."

She closed her eyes, allowing a tear to slide down her cheek. "You would do this for me?"

He lifted her chin. "Yes, I will. Children brighten the world. I love to see them laugh. I'm sure before you were adopted there was not much laughter in those beautiful eyes."

She worried her lip. "What if the others won't agree?"

He smiled. "I doubt they'd disagree. Everyone loves children."

"Everyone except my father."

"We best be on our way. I've dallied enough."

Olivia placed a hand over his. She looked him in the eye. "Thank you, Wesley. I doubt we will need to worry about that thirty day clause. I don't plan on going anywhere."

Wesley clicked at the horse, then turned and tipped the brim of his hat. "Yee-haw!" he chirped, a broad smile on his face.

Olivia giggled. She had a feeling this man was going to be an exciting husband.

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Wesley was in a rare form as he directed the buggy down the trail that led to the Young farm. He pointed towards the right. “The big ranch over yonder is the White ranch. My half-brothers live there with their wives. You’ll meet them soon. It looks like they’re preparing a reception for us.”

Olivia tried to block the sun from her eyes as she watched several people in the distance setting up large tables. A woman stood on the porch waving but she was too far away. Both Wesley and Olivia lifted their hands in greeting.

He directed the buggy down another lane towards a smaller area where a mid-sized farm house stood. To the right, along the border of the property was a small log cabin sitting by itself. A prominent fence with a large open gate stood between the two properties.

A couple stood on the porch of the lone cabin waving. Again, they both lifted their hands in greeting as the two from the porch began to walk across the grass towards the farm house.

Wesley stopped at the farmhouse where his mother stood on the porch. She was a beautiful woman and so young looking. Olivia was surprised. She expected an older woman from the way Wesley described her hard life. This was no old lady. Her skin was soft, not ravaged by the elements. She had soft brown hair that still maintained it’s bright color.

“Hello! You must be Olivia!” Mrs. Young came down the steps while Wesley helped Olivia down from the buggy. She

turned in time to receive a big hug from his mother. Widow Young was surprisingly strong.

"Hello," she told her new mother-in-law.

Widow Young stepped back, holding onto her shoulders. "My son was worried his bride ran off before the ceremony and here you are, proving him wrong. Would you like to go see your room?"

The two went inside, leaving Wesley to take care of the buggy and Dreamer. By the time they returned to the kitchen, the couple was there, waiting for them.

Widow Young gave them both a hug. "This is Russell, my son, and his wife, Naomi."

Olivia's eyes widened. "You look exactly like Wesley. Twins, oh my!"

Naomi laughed and held out her hand. "It is easy to see the difference once you get to know them. My husband is quite a rascal but he is the more serious brother. Wesley likes to crack jokes and smiles more than his brother."

Olivia shook hands with her new sister-in-law. "I'm Olivia Morris, er, Young."

When the two stood facing each other, a strange look came over Naomi's face. "I remember an Olivia from one of the orphanages a long time ago. I was probably ten years old the first time they caught me and placed me there. Of course, I didn't stay long."

"You're an orphan?" Olivia's luck was changing. If Russell's wife was indeed an orphan, perhaps the children would have

a chance here.

Naomi nodded while Russell went outside to help his brother. “New York City. Sometime I’ll tell you the story of how I wound up here. I’m afraid I was a bit deceiving.”

Olivia could relate. She lived her whole life with a lie. “It may have been at Lady Catherine’s Orphanage. I was eight. My brother and I were sent out on the Orphan Train.”

“There were so many children. I didn’t try to befriend anyone since I had been determined to find a way of escape the moment the truant officer dumped me there.” Naomi laughed at the memory.

“Ladies, I believe it’s time we get moving. Miss Nora is waiting.” Widow Young took both ladies arms and directed them out the door. “I’m happy to have such beautiful daughters. Now, let’s enjoy the evening.”

Russell and Wesley had replaced the horse with a fresh one for the buggy. Widow Young was helped in first, then Naomi and Olivia. The two brothers rode along either side on their own mounts. It was a nice jaunt to the neighboring farm and Olivia and Naomi chatted the whole time. What a wonderful feeling to have someone who knew what it was like to be an orphan right here on the farm.

It gave Olivia hope. How much more will the orphans she planned to adopt love it here when they realize there are others like themselves to look up to. They’d see there was hope for a good life. She decided to make it her life’s work to find other families as well who are willing to take in children,

too.

She wanted to tell Wesley how happy it made her but he was in deep conversation with his twin brother. She watched the two for a few moments, realizing Naomi had been right. Russell had a more piercing look, his face serious, his eyes a bit darker than her husbands. Now that she watched them, she realized Wesley had a more relaxed look about him.

“Have they ever exchanged places?” Olivia directed her question to Widow Young.

The widow laughed. “Many times when they were little. I never told them I knew every single time they had. Russell’s hair is a slight bit lighter than Wesley. Since they were always dirty from working the farm they never took time to notice.”

Olivia realized she was right. At first appearances, the two looked identical. Staring at their profiles, Russell’s hair was lighter by a tiny bit if you looked really close. “It’s good to know. I worried when I saw the two I’d be fooled over and over again. Wesley seems likes a jokester.”

Widow Young chuckled. “He’s my happy-go-lucky son. You are correct, he likes to joke and laugh and hasn’t a care in the world. We’re here.”

Ranch hands came to help them from the buggy before Wesley and Russell were able to slide off the saddle. An older gentleman with fiery red hair slapped Wesley on the back. “Congratulations, boy. About time you tied the knot.”

Wesley gave the older man a tap on his shoulder. “Rusty, you old coot, meet my wife, Olivia.”

Everyone vied for a chance to introduce themselves. Olivia felt more loved in the next fifteen minutes than she had ever felt in her entire life.

Wesley took her arm as they walked across the yard to the food tables, which were stocked with meats, vegetables and fresh breads. Several desserts adorned the tables from cakes to cookies and pies. Neighbors from the area kept showing up, placing their donation to the party on the tables while looking to see who the new bride was.

After hours of greeting others and keeping a smile on her face, Olivia had enough socializing. She was never one to be the life of the party even when her father held dinner parties in their home. Almost always forced to attend, she had slipped out early for each one, feigning a headache or some other illness. Olivia swore she had procured so many fake headaches all through the years she hoped she hadn't wished them upon herself.

She really did have one now. She didn't want to ruin things for Wesley by leaving early but she'd had enough. Besides, the people here were so friendly, the exact opposite from the guests in her father's home. She'd put up with an aching head if it meant a new start with her brand new husband.

It was ironic how Wesley noticed. "Are you not feeling well?"

She looked into his eyes, seeing the concern. Reminding herself to never lie to him, she nodded. "I have a tiny headache, although I'm afraid I may have brought it on

myself."

He looked puzzled. "I doubt you are able to do such a thing."

She smiled but wondered about it at the same time. "Perhaps it is true. Years ago, I remember a teacher from the private school we had attended talk about such things. The professor had said what you think about may come true if one is not careful."

"It's highly unlikely you think about headaches. Or, do you?"

His brows were both raised in the air and he had such an amused look on his face it made her giggle. "I'll have you know I would tell my father I had a headache every single time we hosted a party. Now I am afraid it has come to pass and I truly have gotten what I wished for."

Wesley shook his head. "It isn't the same thing. You see, I'm willing to bet the parties your father held were stuffy dinners with no lively people like here. Look at Rusty and his trio over there! I'll bet your father had stuffy violinists who played the same music over and over so much you wanted to fall asleep! I'd pretend a headache, too!"

Rusty was sitting around a small fire, playing the banjo while another tall cowboy sang. Someone else came in on a harmonica while people danced under the moonlight. It was indeed a beautiful sight.

Wesley leaned over the moment she turned back and met her mouth with his own. She closed her eyes and took in his

kiss and the wonderful experience. Certainly, she was in heaven here.

At first she thought the townsfolk were shouting out to her and Wesley for kissing in the middle of the yard. When he stepped back, she turned her head to see where the excitement was at. Three men rolled on the ground, wrestling like mad men, not hitting or trying to hurt each other but laughing so hard and loud everyone else joined in.

Olivia looked on in amusement. “Aren’t those men your half-brothers?” She had met Adam, Samuel and Luke earlier and they were perfect gentlemen. Now, they were like a pack of wolves carousing on the ground.

“Boys! Will you ever learn to act like gentlemen!” A tall woman leaned over the railing of the house, shouting to her sons. Nora White shook a finger at them but her face didn’t look upset at all. She shook her head back and forth.

The moment they heard their Ma, the ruckus slowed down. Three men rolled away from each other, leaning back in the grass, chuckling. Olivia turned away.

Wesley placed an arm along her shoulders. It was a nice move and felt good. She was never someone’s wife before. How did she behave? Squinting, she searched for the wives of the three brothers on the ground. They had been married long enough from her understanding, they may teach her a thing or two.

One of the wives looked up right when Olivia did. She waved her over. “Do you mind if I socialize for a few

minutes?" she asked Wesley.

He shrugged. "Fine by me. I'll go see how the White men are doing. When you are ready to leave let me know and we'll go home."

As Olivia made her way to the ladies, she smiled at his words. Home. She hoped to fill home with several children and soon.

"It's nice to meet you, Olivia. I'm Callie." The blonde woman held out her hand. She seemed to be the boldest of the ladies. She nodded to Naomi, Russell's wife and shook hands with the others. "Before long you'll remember all of our names."

After awhile, Olivia began to search for her husband. He had been standing around with the other brothers but now she wasn't able to see him anywhere.

The moment she stretched her neck to look elsewhere, the other ladies strangely silent. She looked from one to the other but no one dared speak. A look of amusement were on each ladies face.

Warm air made her neck tingle. Her husband was sneaking up behind her, now she understood why the ladies were giving her such a look.

Wesley was indeed a prankster. Well, she was going to teach him a lesson or two. "Ladies, how do I tell Wesley he had a big grass stain on the back of his britches? When we were in Wichita Falls we sat by the waterfalls in the grass. I'm afraid he's been walking around here all night and people

were pointing and staring at his behind."

Callie tried hard not to laugh. Naomi slipped a hand over her mouth while sweet-tempered Abigail tried to pretend she never heard a word. Melody burst out laughing! Olivia wasn't able to contain herself any more. She turned around to find Wesley pulling his shirt out of his pants, trying to cover the area she mentioned.

When he looked up to find all the women staring, he gave Olivia a look of confusion that made her laugh out loud. "I'm sorry, Wesley, it was a joke."

"A joke for the jokester. I get it. Now ladies, if you will excuse me, I'm going to take my wife home."

He came forward, an serious look on his face. Olivia turned to the others but they were all watching Wesley. Before she realized what he had done, Wesley picked her up in his arms. The heat flew to her cheeks. "Wesley, put me down!" She tried to whisper in case anyone heard, then realized everyone there would see her like this.

"I will when we get to the buggy." He deposited her gently onto the bench and turned to Rusty, who was mingling among the guests. "Rusty, can you let Ma know we're heading home. She's inside with Nora."

Rusty nodded, tipping his hat to Olivia. "Sure will. I believe those two are up to some new plans. Heard Nora invite her to stay the night so your Ma may not be home tonight."

Olivia wondered if it was because she was there. After all, it was their first night together as man and wife. Except that

clause was in the way. If they consummated the marriage tonight, the thirty day rule was no longer valid.

Was that what Wesley had planned?

Chapter 6

Wesley put the buggy away for the night then stood in the shadows. He was anxious to be with his wife, yet wasn't sure what to do. From the words she said and her behavior, he was certain they were to become man and wife in every way and yet something was holding him back.

Olivia had assured him there was no reason to wait. She promised him she wasn't planning on having their marriage annulled. What if her father shows up one day and offers her the money she was promised? Then what? Will she walk away from this life to go back to what she'd known for the last ten years?

Wesley had a feeling in his heart she was an honest, wonderful woman. Yet, he knew what can happen when you placed trust in one person. His Ma had trusted Nora White's husband. From what he was told by the farm hand years ago, Robert, Nora's husband, had come to the farm to help out wherever it was needed. Soon after his ma had trusted him to be on the farm daily, he forced his way with her while his own wife was home running their ranch.

His Ma had trusted her neighbor. Until it was too late. That trust had caused her to despise Nora White and everyone on the White Ranch for so many years. The turmoil between the two properties had finally been resolved but Wesley had

remembered how his Ma had hurt.

He was worried, if he were honest with himself. Wesley longed to give his heart to Olivia and yet he knew denying himself was the right thing to do. They had to at least wait the thirty days.

He had promised to be honest with her but he had to know if there was any chance she'd go back. In the morning, Wesley planned to send a telegram to her parents about the wedding ceremony and invite them here.

It was the right thing to do. He had to know. He'd tell her what he had done after he sent the telegram.

Making his way to the farmhouse after spending over an hour in the stables pondering, Wesley noticed the cabin lights were on. Russell and his wife were home now, so the party on the White Ranch was probably winding down. It was time for him to go inside and yet, he tried to keep himself from doing so. If he waited long enough, she may be asleep and then he didn't have to explain why they were not going to become one tonight.

Wesley leaned against the porch rail, his head now pounding. He heard the door open and close and knew when she stood beside him. "Wesley, where have you been?"

He sighed. "Out in the barn. I'm afraid I'm the one who has a headache now."

Wesley knew when she smiled even though he wasn't able to see her facial expression. "I made us both a cup of tea with camomile. Before you ask, it is an herb to sooth your stomach

but I do believe it may soothe your headache, also.

He looked down to see her holding a small tray. Taking it from her, he placed it on the small table that sat between two chairs on the porch. She sat in one while he handed her a cup. Picking up his own, he leaned back, unsure of what to say. How was he going to be honest with a lie?

"I feel your hesitation, Wesley." Maybe he didn't need to say a word. He looked at her, the moonlight giving off a shiver of light, enough to make out her profile.

He sighed.

Olivia's soft words resonated in his ears. "It's been a long day. Can we sit here and relax and enjoy each other's company? The more time I've had to think while you were in the barn, I don't think we are ready yet to take that final step. How about you? Is this why I feel you pulling away?"

He closed his eyes, relief flooding over his skin and body like water over a dam. At least now they had time. He turned to her, seeing her face through the moonlight. Her eyes gleamed, her face in shadows and yet he noticed how shy and vulnerable she looked. "I want us to get to know each other first. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, it is a relief and yet, it worries me."

He took her hand in his. "How so?"

"I don't want to ever leave here. I thought if we consummated the marriage quickly tonight, you would never be able to send me away."

Wesley smiled. "To be honest, I thought the same thing

about you. Afraid you'd go back to your other life, the one where wealth is abundant and your father's money can make your dreams come true."

Olivia actually giggled. "Oh, Wesley, that sounds so horrid. I dislike my father and all his money stands for. All I want is to give children a place where they feel as if they belong. I am hoping it is here, with you."

He squeezed her hand. He was still going to send the telegram. It was time she faced her father, once and for all. If Wesley was going to take in orphan children and give his heart to this woman, he had to know she will never turn away. He learned people say one thing and do another. He had to be sure.

Perhaps he was being too harsh.

"I hope you don't mind, I'm going to bed. Good-night, Wesley." She stood and placed a kiss on his forehead. Wesley watched her go inside, content to sit on the porch in the quiet. A few minutes later, he noticed his brother leave the cabin.

The tall shadow came towards him. Russell sat on the steps, nodding towards the sky. "Good night to star gaze. I was about to go to bed when I saw you sitting over here. Everything okay, Wesley?"

"I think so. Olivia was exhausted, so she went off to bed."

"What's going on, brother? You know you can't fool me."

Wesley told his brother everything. The two always seemed to know when one needed the other. "I'm worried."

“What for? She is a catch! Rich too, from what I heard.”

“You know I don’t care about such things. Besides, she hates her father and all he stands for. Turns out she was adopted from the orphan train.”

“Is this something I need to keep under my hat?”

“For now. Her adopted father made her keep quiet about the adoption. He promised her a large sum of money and when she turned of age he’d give it to her. Turns out it was a lie and he tried to marry her off to one of his associates who was blackmailing him.”

“Whew! That’s a story and a half. Is it all true?”

“I suppose so. She ran away to become a mail order bride. Now that she is indeed married, I’ve decided to send a telegram and invite him here.”

Russell shook his head. “That’s a mistake. It doesn’t sound like she left on good terms.”

Wesley shrugged. “In fact, he had her locked in her room but she got away. It’s time he knows her husband will take care of her.”

“Wesley, there’s something else. What?”

“I never can fool you, can I?”

“No. Now, out with it!”

“I want to make sure she truly wants to be here. What if he offers her the money now that she’s married and no threat? I’m giving her my heart. Look at Ma, how she was fooled. She trusted the White’s and then Mr. White took advantage of her.”

Russell ran a hand through his hair. “Wesley, it doesn’t help your life now to dwell on Ma. She has moved on and so should you. Look what she got from the whole ordeal, you and me!”

Wesley knew his brother was making light of things but still. He wanted to know for sure. “I guess I want a guarantee she won’t walk away.”

“There is no guarantee, brother. You’re foolish to call her family here. I don’t believe she’ll take too kindly to you interfering. She left for a reason. It may even be worse than what you know.”

Wesley stared at the sprinkling of stars in the dark night. Knowing Russell was right still didn’t make a difference. He had to make sure their marriage would last forever.

He knew all he had to do was march upstairs and make her his right now. It was his right as a husband. The more he thought about doing so, the more his own father, Robert White, flashed in his mind. There was no way he’d succumb to be like that man. Not even close. It was why he needed such reassurance. Maybe there was something wrong with him in the head to feel this way.

Russell left, leaving him sitting on the porch for another hour. Wesley made his way inside to the cot in the spare bedroom, where he tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. It was going to be a long night ahead.

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Olivia heard Wesley come inside and up the stairs. At first, she thought he'd open the door to lie with her. When his steps turned away, she knew he was going to honor his word. Closing her eyes, she prayed they would be able to make a good life together. As her body began to relax and her mind slowed down, thoughts of little children running all over the farm began to take root.

She still had to know how Wesley's mother felt about adopting children. Perhaps she'd speak to her about it soon. The sooner the better. She was anxious to get started. Her plans kept her awake deep into the night when she finally fell asleep close to dawn.

Bright sunlight filtered in through the window. Olivia didn't realize where she was at first. Getting out of the warm, comfortable bed, she stretched and began to wash up, then secured hair back in a neat bun. It was not often Olivia found herself alone, usually her maid got her up and going. This would take some getting used to, she thought and then smiled. It was a new life.

She was a new wife and dedicated to make her husband happy. She wondered how? Olivia only ever had to worry about herself, now she'd be responsible for Wesley and probably his mother as well.

She got dressed quickly and went downstairs, deciding to make a visit with with Naomi. Perhaps Russell's wife can give her advice.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, two place settings

stood out on the table. She looked to the far side of the kitchen to find Wesley wearing an apron around his waist as he cooked breakfast.

"Good morning, Olivia."

His words were pleasant. She liked that about the man. She wondered what he was like in a difficult situation. Would he remain calm and focused or shout until his lungs were sore like her father always had?

"Good morning, Wesley. Did you sleep well?"

He didn't answer her question, just nodded. "Sit down and have some breakfast. I've made eggs, bacon and look at this, Dolly provides us with fresh milk each morning!"

"You did all this already? I am impressed."

He filled their plates then sat down across from her. "This is life on the farm. You will get used to rising early, trust me."

She didn't realize her elbows were on the table as she stared at him, amazed. Moving her arms, she smiled. "Can I trust you?"

He picked up her hand, bowing his head. "Yes."

Their morning prayer was swift while Olivia wondered about the man sitting across from her. He did not look her in the eye this morning. Even though he was jovial, he seemed as if there was something on his mind. Did that mean he was up to something sinister? She sighed and tried to pay attention and get rid of the dark thoughts in her head. He was going to be a good husband, she knew.

All of a sudden her head shot up. "Who is Dolly?"

He smiled. “Our family cow. Well, to be honest she is our favorite. We give her special treatment.”

She took a bite of the eggs. “This is good, thanks for doing the cooking this morning. How do you give her special treatment?”

“I’m not really sure. She likes when we talk to her. Most times when Russell is perplexed about something you’ll find him sitting on the stool milking Dolly. She flips her tail around, swatting at flies while he milks her and talks away. If you ever go in the barn and hear someone talking, he’s not speaking to himself only. Dolly seems to enjoy listening.”

Olivia laughed out loud. She imagined little children running around, hearing a grown man discus his problems with a cow. They’d be delighted for sure.

Wesley leaned across the table to give her a sweet kiss. “You seem happy this morning.”

She shivered. “You put this smile on my face, Wesley.”

“I’m glad. I plan to make you laugh every single day.”

“It seems too good to be true. Promise me you will never go a day without doing so.” Olivia knew she was asking far more than a wife was entitled to.

He grinned. “It’s a deal. I’ll make you smile and laugh on a daily basis and you have to do something for me.”

“I knew there was a cost!” She placed a hand on his cheek.

“I want a kiss each morning, noon and night!”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Deal! Here’s the morning kiss.” She gave him what he asked when he pulled her from the chair,

wrapped his arms around her waist and swung her in the air. Olivia's head flew back and she giggled so hard at his antics.

"Well, you two are having so much fun no one heard me come through my own front door!" Widow Young stepped inside, Nora White behind her. The two older ladies stood watching the two while Wesley grinned and placed Olivia on the ground.

The atmosphere became jovial when Russell and Naomi showed up to check on things. Olivia had to smile. It seemed everyone had an interest in the two of them this morning.

"Would anyone like breakfast? I've got some eggs left," Wesley asked.

Widow Young shook her head. "You are kidding, right? You know Nora makes the best flapjacks this side of the prairie!"

Nora piped up. "Olivia, you will have to come for some. How about tomorrow morning?"

Olivia looked to her husband to make sure he approved. When Nora noticed her hesitation, she waved at Wesley. "Bring your husband as well. Everyone may as well show up, that way we can all get to know you."

"I'll be there with the whole family," Olivia mentioned, thanking Nora for the invite. "How early do you want us there?"

Nora looked at Widow Young and laughed. "Don't you worry, I'll send Rusty down to let you know when they're about ready. Make sure you let the gate open, Wesley, since it

will be dark yet."

Olivia's eyes opened wide. Dark? Did that mean she had to wake up even earlier than this morning? Oh, dear! She had better get to bed early tonight! Farm life was exhausting and this was only her second day. What happens when she has to do real farm work like gardening and cooking and such?

Olivia sighed. She'd learn whatever she had to even if it was harder than she ever worked in her life. She wanted those poor orphans to be set free and give as many as possible a life away from poverty and heartache.

"Olivia?"

She had been in deep thought. Olivia knew everyone's attention was on her. Her husband had been speaking and here she was lolly-gagging. "I need to go to Wichita Falls this morning. I'll be back in a few hours. Ma and Nora will be here to show you some things around the farm."

Olivia waved while he headed away from the farm, his mare taking him down the road at a steady pace. She watched until he was a small figure in the distance. Her heart pounded, she missed him already. How strange was that feeling?

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Making his way down the street towards the telegraph office, Wesley nodded to several men in Wichita Falls. He wondered if he was doing the right thing after the display of

affection everyone showed for his wife this morning.

When Nora invited Olivia to breakfast, he realized they were going to accept his wife as one of their own. What if his actions today upset Olivia so much she left him?

His head was so full of what if's he almost didn't hear the loud noise before a man crossed the street almost in front of him. Luckily, Wesley moved his mare out of the way in time. Grateful the passer-by thought to holler to catch his attention inspired Wesley to stop drifting off in tangents concerning his wife. He had to keep his head on straight.

He'd take care of this matter, meet her parents and make sure they understood she was never to be threatened again. Wesley didn't care how rich they were. He wanted her father to know that he'd see to her from now on. Was the real reason to test Olivia or to make sure her family knew they'd never be able to hurt her again? He really wasn't sure.

At the telegraph office, he played around with the wording of the telegram for almost an hour. *Mr. and Mrs. Morris. Stop. This is an invitation to visit our farm south-west of Wichita Falls. Stop. Olivia is happy and content. Stop. See for yourself. Stop. Wesley Young. Stop.*

"You done yet?"

Wesley looked up to see the telegraph officer staring at him, impatience written all over his pale face.

"Go ahead. Send it off." He paid for the words and left, turning back once as if he were going to stop the machine from sending the message.

Now he'd wait to see if they showed up and crossed his fingers Olivia would not be too angry with him. He had to discuss what he'd done with her before they arrived. If they'd even come here. But what if her folks didn't care enough to make the effort? Perhaps he'd wait to see if there was a reply before mentioning what he'd done.

Wesley wandered over to the café, where he had them wrap a few of Jenna's pastries in a sack. Nodding to the Sheriff who stood drinking coffee and chatting with the cook, he made his way outside into the sunlight. It was a fine day indeed. He felt hopeful for the first time since sending the telegram. She may be upset at first but how will she be able to stay mad after eating one of Jenna's delicious pastries.

A small shop down the street caught his eye. In the display window glittered several pieces of jewelry, rings and watches. Wesley stopped in to see what else they had. It looked as if the store recently opened.

He had noticed a beautiful cross around Olivia's neck. The cross was large with a pearl in the center but it hung on an old piece of rawhide that seemed tattered at the edges. So unusual for such a well-to-do lady. He picked out a thick piece of ribbon to hang the cross on. The fabric was soft and velvety with a metal ring to attach the cross to. He tossed a few coins onto the glass counter, the noise catching the proprietor's attention.

Taking his time, Wesley made his way home. If it were up to him, he'd never leave there. They had everything they

needed. Will it be enough for Olivia? He had placed his gifts in the saddlebag and now he questioned if they were good enough for a woman like her? Did she expect more?

Was a farmer like him able to keep a woman like Olivia happy?

Chapter 7

Olivia had spent hours with Nora and Widow Young but was anxious now for Wesley to return. She missed him! It was hard to believe but she really did. Besides, with him gone, he'd be missing his second kiss of the day. She had promised him three kisses, morning, noon and night and cross her heart, she was going to make sure he got every one!

A giggle escaped her.

"Are you OK, Olivia?" Widow Young frowned at her.

"I am fine. Thank you for teaching me so much today. I would like to visit with Naomi if you don't mind."

"Not at all. You've been a good student. In no time, you'll be able to cook Wesley a meal fit for a king."

Nora stood at the kitchen table and smirked. Olivia rolled her eyes. "We all know that's not going to happen. I'm a horrible cook!" At least she was willing to admit it to herself and everyone else here. Her mother in law was being kind. The two older ladies had patiently tried to teach her how to make flapjacks.

Olivia had almost overturned the whole bowl at one point. Then, when she began to cook them on the stove, the first try resulted in burnt cakes and the second try was a gobbed together mess resulting in one huge undercooked lump in the middle of the pan.

Olivia was careful not to let the screened door slam as she left. Nora left at the same time, riding through the gate on her mare, waving to the red-haired Rusty as he rode towards her. She stood watching them for a second, then made her way through the grass towards the small cabin.

Naomi was outside on her knees, digging in the dirt. When she saw Olivia, she waved her over. “How is your lesson going?”

Olivia stooped down beside her. “Terrible. I believe I am and forever will be their worst student ever. Nora was honest and basically agreed that I am a horrible cook while Widow Young tried to make me feel as if I would someday be wonderful at it. Except the truth is, I don’t even like cooking.”

Naomi patted her on the shoulder. “Let’s have some lemonade and I’ll tell you some stories about my own experiences.”

Olivia spent hours talking and laughing at Naomi’s antics in the kitchen. Her arm was folded over her stomach as her whole body shook laughing at the story of how Naomi put flour in lemonade instead of sugar. She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Oh, Naomi, I don’t feel alone any longer. I think I’ve met my match.”

“On the streets of New York, there is no way to learn how to cook. I’ve learned everything by trial and error and the help of Widow Young. She is like a mother to me. My husband helps sometimes, you know.”

“I was so little when we were on the streets. There isn’t too

much I remember, it's mostly erased from my mind."

Naomi smiled. "It's there, deep down inside. Someday you may remember. Do you have any memory of your parents."

"None, whatsoever. Although my brother Cal, his real name is Calvin, he said this necklace was hers. I've had it ever since I can remember."

"It's a beautiful cross. Maybe someday the memory will come back."

Olivia shrugged. "I don't think so. I doubt I want to know who they are or were. How do you throw away your child?"

Naomi shook her head. "I don't know. There are things that happen we know nothing about. Maybe they had no control over things. You never know."

"Naomi, my heart's desire is to give some of these children a home. The Orphan Train is in need of homes that will open their hearts and mind to these poor children. I've spoken to Wesley about it and he is willing to help make this dream of mine come true. Will you consider opening your home to one or two?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes, I will. I'm sure Russell will agree as well. What a blessing you are, Olivia!" She gave her a hug. "I knew there was something special about you the moment I saw you. It has also been a desire of mine to be able to keep children from living a life on the streets."

"We can't do it all, but perhaps we can help in our own way."

Naomi nodded. "I have an idea. What if we collected names

of families that are willing to assist and take in children all throughout the area?"

Olivia jumped in. "Yes! We can form an alliance of sorts! Perhaps if we have enough people involved, the Orphan Train will stop somewhere near here."

The two chatted for another hour. "I know many of the ladies who will come on board and get involved but we have to go visit them in Mill Ridge and Wichita Falls. Oh, Olivia, I'm so happy God sent you here."

Olivia looked up to see her husband riding down the lane to the farm. She gave Naomi a hug with a promise to have a meeting tomorrow after her cooking lessons. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

She ran towards the barn where Wesley was heading towards. When he slid from the saddle, he turned and gave her a smile. "Hello, Mrs. White. I'm home."

He tipped his hat to her and it almost fell when she ran up to him and flung her arms around his neck. "I'm so happy to see you!" She raised her head, giving him a long, sweet kiss right on his mouth. His hat did drop to the ground then as he put both arms around her and swung her in the air.

"Wow, what a kiss!" Then he went about in a circle, causing the stable hand to wander out to see what all the noise was about.

He ducked back inside when he saw the two.

She giggled. "I think we embarrassed him."

He nuzzled her neck. "He needs to learn sometime. The boy

will be sixteen next month."

"Does he work here every single day?"

"Yes, he takes care of the horses and does chores on the farm. He lives in the small shack behind the stable."

"You have a small shack back there?" Olivia hadn't noticed. Why hadn't the boy come out before now?

Wesley nodded. "Yes, his father was one of the farm hands who worked here on occasion. They lived on a small homestead down the road until his wife died about two years ago. He'd come help us a few times a week to earn extra money. Turns out he had what they call consumption and wanted to make sure his boy was taken care of. He sold his own place, then ma settled them both in the shack around the back until he passed away last year. She's tried to get Jeremiah to come inside the house, yet he prefers to stay there alone."

"What a terrible thing to happen, to lose both parents in such a short time. If there is anything I can do, Wesley Young, you stop that!"

He hadn't been paying attention to her sincere words, he kept nibbling on her neck, making her incoherent. She slid from his arms and took a step back. "I'm going to go visit with young Jeremiah."

"I get home and look at you, already going off to see other men."

Olivia laughed out loud. "He's a young man, Wesley. Behave yourself. I'm so happy you're back."

Wesley brushed down his mare while she went to find Jeremiah. He was in one of the empty stalls cleaning it out.

The smell was pretty bad but Olivia wanted to prove to herself she'd be able to handle life on a farm. Except she truly wished she brought along a hanky to place over her nose. Instead, she lifted a hand. "Hello, Jeremiah. Do you mind if I call you by your first name?"

The boy lifted his head. "No."

"I'm Olivia, Wesley's wife."

"I know who you are."

"I guess you do. I'll bet you don't miss much around here, do you?"

He shook his head.

"Jeremiah, have you ever heard of the Orphan Train?"

He shook his head again.

"Well, it's a train that comes all the way from New York or another big city like Atlanta or Pittsburgh. There are children on it that need a place to live. I want to bring children here so they have a real home. Most are left on the streets with nowhere to go. They have no parents."

His eyes perked up when he heard the children were homeless and without a mother or father. "Why are you telling me?"

"I thought you may be interested in teaching them how to take care of a horse. Will you help me with the children?"

He slowly nodded.

Although he tried to hide his emotions, Olivia saw

something burning there. Was it hope? “I’ll see you later. Are you coming to the house for supper?”

He hesitated for a moment. “I usually don’t. Sometimes Widow Young sends supper here.”

“How am I going to discuss my plans if you don’t join in at supper. I haven’t told Widow Young yet, maybe you can help me convince her that poor homeless children are a Godsend.”

“I guess I can help.”

She smiled. “You have to sound more convincing than that, Jeremiah, or she will baulk at my ideas.”

He nodded, then turned away to finish his work. Olivia left the stable feeling satisfied she did some good.

Wesley was waiting to walk back to the house with her. “All done?” he asked, jumping down to hold out his arm. She took it and began to walk alongside him.

“Yes, we had a pleasant conversation. He’ll be at supper tonight.”

Wesley whistled loud and clear. “It’s not often anyone can tear him away from the horses. He likes to be alone.”

“Oh, I do believe that will change. Mark my words, dear husband.”

Wesley took the long way back to the farmhouse. He showed Olivia where the orchards were, the garden and smoke house. “This is where you can get fresh vegetables. By next year, you’ll be an expert gardener.”

He’d get a nice surprise when he found out she was an excellent gardener. Olivia had plenty of practice at her

father's home. She had spent many afternoons helping Perry, the family gardener. When her father caught her, he'd send her inside, but she'd go right back out the next day. At least there was something she was good at.

She was enjoying the stroll, his monotone voice explaining how the farm ran. "You sure are a proud farmer, aren't you, Wesley?"

"Sure am. It's all I've known. Ma worked hard to keep this place even though others tried talking her in to giving it up after her husband died. She never wavered. It's my honor to continue to keep this place going. I guess you can say it's our legacy."

"It is a legacy and one to be proud of."

"I got you a gift."

"You did."

He had slung his saddlebag over his shoulder before they began to walk. Now, he lowered the bag to the ground, rummaging through until he pulled out a medium sized sack. "Here is gift number one."

"I love sweets!" Olivia wanted to take a bite out of one of the pastries. She looked around to see if anyone was watching and dug her teeth into it. Wesley laughed out loud.

"You'll ruin your supper!"

"Then why did you give this to me now? Here, try some." She put the sweet to his mouth and he took a bite, grinning when the taste hit his tongue.

"I'm hooked," he told her after he swallowed. "Give me

another bite." They passed the sweet back and forth until it was gone, laughing the whole time.

"The other one I'll share with your mother," Olivia chirped, her mouth still full of food. She put a hand over her mouth when she realized she spoke with a mouthful of food. It was so unladylike.

Yet, Wesley showed her he didn't mind. He laughed out loud, taking bites and laughing with his mouth full of the sweet pastry, too. It was so refreshing they didn't have to pretend to like each other. Before she realized, the bell sounded for supper. "Now we ruined our supper palate," Olivia teased.

Wesley shook his head. "Not me, I can eat a horse and a cow, I'm famished."

"Well, then, we should go. Look who is coming across the yard."

Jeremiah made his way towards them, his head hung down.

"The boy needs some encouragement," she told Wesley. "I plan to help him."

"How?"

"Orphan Train children. What better way to help yourself than to help someone else. It will be good for him. Are you sure you don't mind if I start a movement here? Naomi and I talked about it today. She wants to help."

"We have the room," Wesley told her. "I'd like to wait a few weeks though before we get any children. How about if

we wait until our thirty day period is up?"

Olivia looked at him. He was staring straight ahead. "That's a strange request, Wesley, is there something you are not telling me?" She was good at reading people's expressions and his proclaimed secrecy. What was he hiding?

Jeremiah came up beside them just then. "Mr. Young, Mrs. Young," he greeted.

Wesley seemed relieved to change the subject. "Now, Jeremiah, you know I don't take kindly to being called Mr. Young. I'm Wesley. How many times do I have to tell you?"

The boy shrugged. He sure did a lot of shrugging, Olivia thought. Well, that will change! They hurried to the farm house and up the steps. The smell of fried chicken wafted through the house and out the door. Wesley dumped his saddlebag on the porch and opened the door for Olivia and Jeremiah.

"Widow Young, can I be of any help?"

"No, you sit down, Olivia. Knowing you are making my son happy is all the help I need."

Wesley mother was so sweet and nice to her. She almost felt bad about bombarding her with such a request later. Yet, there were many children's lives at stake.

After the dishes were cleared and the leftover food put away, Olivia saw her chance to speak with his mother. Jeremiah had surprisingly hung around, not in a hurry to go to his home. They retired to the front porch with a glass of lemonade. "Mrs. Young, I'd like to make a proposal."

“What is it, dear?”

Olivia got up from the rocker and sat beside the widow on the bench. She turned to her. “I didn’t want to share this with anyone other than my husband but I feel it will be necessary so you understand my situation.”

“Go on.” She had the widow’s full attention now.

Olivia sighed. “I am originally an orphan. My adopted father got me from the orphan train. It is my hearts desire to do the same for other children and would like your permission to take in a child or two. Naomi has also agreed. We’d like to ask others in the area to take in children also so the train will stop in Wichita Falls.” She blew what was left of air from her lungs.

The widow stared at her. Olivia was afraid she’d refuse. Her voice was firm. “Olivia, what about your own children? Will you love these orphan children the same as your own?”

Olivia didn’t need time to think about the request. “Of course. I have a great appreciation for adopted children as I am one.” She didn’t think it mattered any more if she spoke of her past. After all, her father was far away, there was no need to keep quiet. He no doubt told everyone in his circle she was sent off to school or to a relatives home far away.

Widow Young turned to the young man. “Jeremiah, is part of the reason you are here this evening because of the request I heard from Olivia.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am, I would like to help teach the children how to take care of animals.”

A smile curved the Widow Young's smooth features. She looked from one to the other. "You have my blessing. Although, you didn't need to ask. This is your home now, Olivia."

Olivia jumped up and gave her a hug. "Thank you, Ma!" She hadn't realized she spoke the intimate words at first. When she realized what she said, she took a step back and slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

Widow Young stood. "You are beginning to sound and act just like a daughter so please, do not be ashamed to call me Ma."

"Thank you." It was all Olivia was able to say. Tears welled in her eyes. They were about to flow out when the widow gave her a hug.

"Wesley, walk our young man to the stables. I'd like a word with Olivia, please."

Jeremiah mumbled how he was a man and can walk himself but Wesley informed him when ma made a request there wasn't much anyone can do or say.

Olivia was worried she had overstepped her boundary and his ma didn't want to shame her in front of anyone. At least she was kinder than her adopted father, who'd have shouted at her no matter who was present.

"Follow me, dear." The two went to Widow Young's bedroom where she slipped open a small case on her night stand. Taking out an object, she handed it to Olivia.

It was a wedding band made of gold. "Go on, see if it fits."

She slipped it on her left hand. “It is perfect.”

“It belongs to you. I saved the ring for Wesley’s bride. Russell’s wife has a pendant from me. This was from my husband, not his father. It’s a long story I’m sure Wesley will indulge at some point.”

“I know some of the story already and please know I am honored to accept this.” It was hard to keep the tears back now.

“Go on now, it’s time I retired. Go to your husband.” The two hugged before Olivia made her way to the porch. She sat on the bench, staring at her husband as he walked back through the yard.

“Hey, why the tears?” He wiped them away with his hand.

“They are happy tears. Look at this.”

“From Ma? It’s perfect for you, Olivia. I have something else for you, wait here.” He went to his saddlebag and handed her a small bag.

Olivia sniffed while she reached in to see what the pouch held. She pulled out a pretty ribbon made of velvet. “It’s so soft and beautiful.”

“Like you. Thought maybe you’d like it.”

She nodded, unable to speak. Two gifts in one day was making her heart sing. “Can you help me? I’d like to wear this right now.” She untied the rawhide strap she always used to keep the cross around her neck. She had figured it would always be close to her heart if she never took it off.

Wesley sat beside her and replaced the rawhide with the

ribbon. He handed her the ragged piece back, then tied the ribbon around her neck. “It suits you.” He dipped his head to give her a long, gentle kiss.

Olivia thanked him with a hug. “I don’t know if it is true but Cal says my real mother gave me this cross. I never take it off, no matter what. Sometimes, I wonder if he didn’t steal it and tell me a story to make me feel better.”

Wesley grinned. “Cal sounds like a smart man.”

“I miss him.”

“I’m sure. Guess we better get off to bed. It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow.”

Wesley walked Olivia to her bedroom door, dipped his head and gave her a sweet kiss. Nodding, he turned and left her at the door. “Goodnight, Olivia.”

“Goodnight, Wesley.”

It was going to be another long night without him but she wanted to respect his wishes for them to get to know each other better. She just kept getting this nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right. Wesley was holding back something that had happened in Wichita Falls.

After washing up, she slid under the covers to stare at the darkness all around. Tomorrow she would put her heart and soul in to learning how to run the farm. Then, the movement would begin to get the orphan train to pass through.

Olivia didn’t know how long she laid awake, dreaming of the sound of the train.

Chapter 8

Wesley spent the following week looking over his shoulder every time a buggy came down the road. He half expected her parents to show up without warning. He needed to be honest and tell her what he did and yet what if her father refused to acknowledge his daughter? There would be no need to tell her anything then. “I’m not sure if I should tell her, Dolly. What would you do?”

What he really wanted more than anything was the chance to tell Morris he was going to take good care of Olivia and his money didn’t mean anything any more. He wanted her father to know she was being taken care of by people who cared about her for once in her life.

“I must tell her about the telegram soon,” he told Dolly, keeping his voice low. He knew how his brother liked to sneak around and catch him talking to the cow. Russell thought he was the only one who talked to her but Wesley had taken to speaking his mind at times, too. Dolly was a good listener.

She swatted at him, hitting him directly in the head. “Are you trying to tell me what a fool I am? I know I have to spill the beans, Dolly. I’ll explain things to my wife tonight.”

“Spill what beans? What did you do, brother?”

And there he was, directly beside Wesley, interfering like usual. “I swear, Russell, stop sneaking up on people. It’s

creepy."

His brother shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "You going to share that pail of milk? I'm hankering for some fresh milk to go with my apple pie this evening."

"Sure will." Wesley stood, swatting Dolly on the backside as she made her way out the door, strolling along as if she didn't have a care in the world. He picked up the pail. "Apple pie, you say? Ma tried to show Olivia how to make cookies today but all I saw was a pile of burntness on the basket by the table. Guess the animals will have cookies but I won't."

Russell laughed, swatting his brother on the back. "Come with me, I think I can talk Naomi in to sharing the pie. She probably made an extra one to give away. What's eating at you, brother?"

Wesley let out a deep groan. "I lied. Well, I didn't exactly lie. Probably can be considered a lie if you think about it for too long. Let's put it this way, I didn't disclose the fact I sent the telegram to her father last week."

"I told you that was probably a mistake. You didn't tell Olivia, did you?"

"Afraid not. Was hoping to hear something back."

"Have you gone to Wichita Falls to check?"

He shook his head.

"Don't you think you should go? A return telegram isn't going to work its way back here without help." Russell grinned at his own joke.

"True, but some of the men still go to town from the White

Ranch every week."

"They're running thin right now."

Wesley groaned now that he realized why he hadn't heard a word back. "I was waiting on one of the hands to drop it off like they usually do. I forgot most are on a cattle drive. No one will be going in to town until they return and there's only one person manning the telegraph office. He's probably too much of a tight-wad to hire a messenger."

Russell shook his head. "He's got the oldest Wilson boy delivering telegrams so her father may not have sent one yet. Sounds like we need to take a trip tomorrow. I'll come with you."

"Maybe we should take the women so they don't get tired of the farm."

"You still worried your wife is going to up and leave you high and dry? It's time to realize she adores you, brother. Stop beating on yourself."

Wesley shrugged. "Guess you're right. It is ingrained in me and I can't shake off the thought. Not even sure why."

"Let's make sure our ladies have a nice day out tomorrow, away from the hard work." Russell let his brother in the door first and turned to his wife. "I have a surprise."

Wesley soon left with a whole apple pie. He balanced the pie in one hand and what was left of the pail of milk in the other when he noticed Jeremiah making his way across the grass. His wife had to be credited for the boy coming out of his shell. He'd been to the supper table every night this week.

“Jeremiah! Wait up.”

The boy turned to wait. “What do you got there?”

“Apple pie!”

The boy’s eyes widened. “I thought we’d be stuck eating those dark, crispy cookies.”

Wesley laughed before he groaned. “No way. I doubt we’d be expected to eat them. Now we have a pie. Here, you give it to Ma. She’ll appreciate someone made an effort.”

“Olivia doesn’t seem like she enjoys cooking. When I go in the kitchen, she has such a look on her face. I’m not sure she’ll ever get used to that stove.”

“You’re pretty bright for a young man. I think you are right but she won’t give up. Olivia isn’t one to give up too easily.”

Jeremiah leaned over and whispered. “I hate to say this but I’m so happy when Widow Young does the cooking.”

Wesley slapped the boy on the back. “Me to, son. Me, too!”

Both women smiled when Jeremiah came through the door. “Glad to see you, son,” Widow Young called out. “You, too, Wesley!”

“Humph! Now I’m reduced to my name instead of son! Thanks, Ma!” He gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug. He was kidding around, glad to see her eyes light up. Jeremiah was good for the family. Caring about someone else gave his mother motivation. After all, Russell and him were grown men. The boy gave her someone to take care of.

“You ready for the second one of the day?” Wesley’s wife asked, her voice filled with laughter.

Wesley turned, took her by the waist and gave her a kiss before she had a chance to kiss him first. “Now you still owe me two more kisses since I got to you first.”

Olivia smirked. “That hardly seems fair.”

“I never said I was a fair man.” He immediately sobered. If truth be told, he wasn’t an honest man, either. Not telling her about the telegram was grating on his nerves. After tomorrow, he promised himself he’d tell her, no matter the outcome. Even if her father never sent a telegram, she had the right to know what he tried to do.

Feeling better about his decision, he enjoyed their banter at the supper table. Widow Young was never one to reprimand her boys when they carried on. She wanted them to always feel as if the table was the center of their life, where they were able to gather all together to be themselves. Except for the seriousness of the supper prayer, they joked and talked throughout the meal.

When the whole family went to town they sometimes got stared at. Most people were quiet and told to be seen and not heard. He loved his ma for treating them as an individual and not conforming to what others thought. It was a gift he hoped to carry on to his own children someday.

Or, in their case, his own and adopted children. Olivia was bent on bringing in orphans and he wasn’t adverse to the idea. Everyone needed a home and they had an abundance here on the farm. The way she was brought up, in a rich home with everything at her disposal, in a way it surprised

Wesley that her desire to help others was so fierce. Yet, it shouldn't. His wife was one of a kind.

"I have an announcement to make," Wesley told the others while the pie was being sliced.

"Well, out with it, son." Widow Young handed him a plate.

"Russell and I have some business to attend to in Wichita Falls tomorrow and we'd like the ladies to come along for the ride. Would you also like to come along, Ma?"

"I'm afraid not, son. I'm meeting with the good reverend over at Cooper's Ridge. I plan to discuss with him the idea of the orphan train."

Wesley watched as Olivia's eyes sparkled. The idea of others wanting to help her with the children gave her a vitality he hadn't seen since she came here. He had hoped he put that sparkle in her eye by offering to take her to town. In all honesty, he knew the truth. He barely listened as the two spoke of the possibility of Cooper's Ridge taking in children, feeling put out.

After a few minutes, he slipped out the door without them even noticing and sat on the porch. Maybe she wasn't interested in making a day of it tomorrow. Olivia hadn't acknowledged his idea at all. The moment she heard what his ma was trying to do, she had forgotten his plans.

He had been thinking of asking his ma to put together a food basket for the four of them to enjoy by the waterfall. Now he wasn't sure his wife even wanted to go along.

Jeremiah joined him on the porch. "You don't look happy."

He sat on the rocker beside Wesley, another slice of apple pie on his plate.

"Not sure where you put it all, boy," Wesley told him.

The boy grinned. "I'm not sure, either. I'm hoping to take a slice on home to have later."

Wesley shook his head. He remembered being sixteen. It seemed like a long time ago. All he wanted was to keep the farm going back then, to keep a frown from appearing on his ma's face. It had been hard work. Now, looking back, it was worth every sleepless night. "I'm sure you'll get a slice to take home. Ma can't seem to refuse anything you ask her for."

"It's a gift," the sixteen year-old spouted, puffing out his chest.

"You'll find out later in life you won't always get your own way."

"Is that why you're not happy, Wesley? I noticed your wife didn't tell you she'd go along tomorrow. If it weren't for taking care of the horse, I'd go with you."

It was a surprise to hear Jeremiah wanted to go to town. Since he came here he had spent all of his free time either in the stables or in the small cabin he called home. It wasn't even a cabin, just a two room shack they had used to store things at one time. When they had moved his Pa and him here, they emptied it out quick to make it a home for the two.

Russell and Wesley had installed a stove a few years back to take off the chill on cool nights. Even though they didn't need much heat in Texas, there were some nights that needed

a touch of heat. Not only for warmth but for cooking as well. It was a shame Jeremiah's dad had died so young. "You should come along tomorrow. The horses will be fine for a few hours. It'll do you good."

"Do you think so? They always seem to need me. And now that Dreamer is here, she likes to nuzzle up to me every single day." A bit of pride was in his young voice.

Wesley grinned. "Did you ever think the horses need a break from you?"

Jeremiah slapped his leg and made a noise. "That's crazy, Wesley. Those horses love me!"

The boy finished his pie and stood.

"Tomorrow you take the morning off and come with us. As your boss, I insist."

Jeremiah leaned over so the ladies inside didn't hear. "We all know who is in charge here. It's Widow Young and Olivia. They're always telling me what to do."

Wesley laughed. "You know, son, you are smarter than you realize. I'll make sure your lady bosses know where you will be tomorrow. Head on home now, we'll be leaving right after breakfast."

He watched the boy cross the yard. Jeremiah had stayed to himself for so long, it was a blessing to see he was starting to come around. Thanks to his wife's kindness. She had a way about her, that was for sure.

Wesley frowned. Every night this week and last they had sat together each evening on the porch after supper. The

women's voices bounced through the room and out through the window for the last half hour. Had she forgotten about him?

Had Wesley served his purpose and now she no longer needed him? A pang of jealousy ripped through his heart. Was it possible to be jealous of his own ma and some poor orphans he never even met?

The screen door swung open while he was deep in thought. A sigh of relief passed through him when his wife came out with two glasses of lemonade. He was ashamed of himself for his inner thoughts taking a wrong turn.

"I am sorry, Wesley, I didn't mean to leave you here alone this long." She sat close to him on the bench, her warmth closing in.

He closed his eyes. "It's fine, Olivia. I was enjoying a conversation with Jeremiah. I am glad you and Ma get along so well."

"Good. There will be lots of planning to do now that she is on our side with the orphans. I hope you won't mind."

He didn't reply. He did mind. This time in the evening had been their time together. At least he had looked at it that way. He was busy all day long working the farm. The evenings had been bliss for him since she came along. Now she was going to take that away. Was he selfish?

Staring down at his wife he realized the first day they met she seemed frightened. Now, she was content and happy. She had left a home that was filled with anxiety and bitterness to

come here, to a place where serenity and peace were abundant. He was the one being selfish. “I don’t mind. I will miss our evenings together. To be honest, I’m jealous.”

She snuggled in beside him, taking a sip of her drink. “Oh, I don’t plan to replace this time of the day with anyone. Not on your life, Wesley. It’s what I look forward to each day.”

Wesley sighed. “I’m glad. It’s what I look forward to each day, also.”

She looked at him, surprised. “You do?”

When he nodded, she snuggled even closer. He draped an arm across her shoulders. They sat for some time staring out at the many stars lit up tonight. The moon was low, darkening the sky but those tiny clusters were always a sight to see. The sky seemed to go on forever.

“I’ll be looking forward to tomorrow’s adventure,” she told him.

“I have some business to attend to, but once I’m free, we’ll visit some shops and make it a special day.”

“Actually, Wesley, Naomi and I were planning to travel to Wichita Falls tomorrow to see Miss Addie anyway. There is a charity ball coming up, you know, the one I donated my dress to, and the ladies are calling a special meeting. I plan to help all I can.”

Wesley had forgotten. “I do recall now. We’ll have to rearrange a few things. I’m glad I can be of service and take you myself. Jeremiah is also coming along.”

“What a surprise. He never leaves the horses.” At his nod,

she went on. “Dreamer has been so happy here. I love riding her around the farm when I can. Do you think we can ride to Wichita Falls tomorrow instead of taking the buggy?”

Wesley dipped his head to place a kiss on her forehead. “Yes, Wesley and Naomi can take the buggy since she’s not too fond of riding. We’ll plan a picnic.”

“How nice, it will be fun.”

Wesley blew air from his lungs. As long as everything went well in Wichita Falls tomorrow, he wasn’t going to worry. He prayed she’d understand his motives for sending that telegram to her father. At least tomorrow the truth will come out.

He hoped.

Chapter 9

Olivia had Dreamer ready to go first thing in the morning. She was so excited to be riding at last. The past few weeks had been so hectic getting to know the farm and what her chores were that she felt as if she were neglecting her mare. At least Jeremiah had taken good care of her prized darling.

Young Jeremiah was ready and waiting on his own horse, excited and raring to head out. She tilted her head and smiled at his anticipation. He wore a pair of dark brown pants, along with a clean long sleeved shirt. A wide brimmed hat sat neatly on his head. He looked the cowboy. All he needed was a pair of good boots and he'd be a genuine cowboy.

When Wesley came out on his own mare, she smiled. He was a handsome devil in a pair of black trousers, a long sleeved cotton shirt and a dark vest to match his pants. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat low over his brow, he made her heart rate go up even more.

"Howdy, ma'am." Wesley winked and gave her a wide smile.

"You look quite dapper this morning, sir," she teased but meant every word.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm dressing up for my pretty wife. You look splendid each and every morning."

She blushed. He always tried hard to make her smile. This

day was going to be so wonderful. Just then Russell and Naomi got in their buggy, waving to Widow Young as they drove over to the barn. “All saddled up?” Russell called out. At Wesley’s nod, he clicked his tongue for the horse to go. “Get on with you, then.”

The first leg of their ride was blissful. Olivia took in as much of the scenery as possible while still keeping an eye on the road ahead. On her way to the farm the first day hadn’t been as nice since everything was so new and scary. But now, she was taking in the blue sky that danced so low she wanted to reach out and touch the fluffy white clouds.

Several buggies passed by, a single horseman and a man that looked as if he had been out on the prairie for weeks. His clothes were dirty while the dust and dirt covered most of his face and hair. He didn’t even have a hat on his head. Naomi immediately spoke up before anyone else had a chance. “Sir, do you need some water?”

He nodded but it looked as if it took all his energy to do so. “Much obliged,” he croaked. Olivia didn’t think he had the strength to reach for the canteen Naomi held out. Olivia slowed Dreamer, turning back to the buggy. She reached down and took the canteen from Naomi and held it out to the stranger.

He tried to pick it up but his hand slipped. Since her mare was about the same height as his, she popped open the lid and held it to his mouth. “Let me help you.” His lips greedily took in water, the excess dribbling down his chin. After a

moment his eyes popped open as if the water brought him back to life.

A deep shudder went through the stranger. “Thank you,” he told her, unable to smile. His nod was enough.

“Here, take the rest.”

Wesley came up beside her. “You looking for work?” When the man grunted, Wesley instructed him to go to the White Ranch. “It’s the first lane you’ll see about two miles down this road. Ask for Rusty and tell him Wesley sent you. Good luck.”

Olivia hated to leave the man in such bad shape. “Is there anything we can do?” she asked Wesley, who urged her to keep moving.

“He has water and direction. He should make it to the ranch. If not, there are others passing by and will see him. Most people help one another in these parts.”

“That’s a switch from my other life.”

Wesley grinned. “I like how you say your other life.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Yep, you seem content here, Olivia and yet it makes me wonder if you ever miss it?”

She almost stopped Dreamer before realizing the buggy was right behind them. “You mean the life where my father dictated my every move? The one where he lied to the world and I was instructed to smile and make everyone believe he was this wonderful man whose word was made of gold when it actually was not? The life where I was going to be forced to marry a man like him? That life?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Wesley looked uncomfortable. “You did not upset me. I am not quite sure how you can believe that life is something I’d miss, though.”

“You do sound upset.”

“Well, I’m not.” Yet, she was. She dug in her heels to speed up Dreamer. They took off leaving Wesley and his mare in the dust.

Except he wasn’t the kind of man to be left behind. Before she knew how he’d react, he was right beside her, an apologetic look on his face. She burst out laughing then. He was adorable!

“I’ll never question your intentions again.”

“Never?”

“Never,” he told her. “Unless you bring up the subject.”

“That will not happen. I’m done with those people. They are horrible and mean and I am happy to be away from them.”

She looked at Wesley then to see a disturbing look on his face. Why was he looking worried? As if his whole world was about to collapse?

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Olivia was so impressed with the Wichita Falls Hotel she felt as if she were in Dallas. The intricate detail the moment they walked in the lobby was astounding for a small town

hotel. Someone put tons of money in this building.

Miss Addie leaned over. “You are not the first person to have such an expression on your face.”

“No? It’s exquisite.”

“Lily Morgan’s husband, Ben, is a prominent member of our town and has placed a great deal of his money into investments here. This is his first. It is their baby, so to speak, since they haven’t had children yet.”

Naomi nudged Olivia and leaned in. “It’s because they don’t have time for anyone or anything else but each other. A child would most certainly get in their way.”

“Naomi, no truer words were spoken but there they are, so keep your voice down about their affairs.” Miss Addie turned and smiled at the woman coming towards them.

She was stunning! Olivia watched the woman with long, dark hair in a deep red gown float across the lobby, her smile for them alone. “You must be the ladies we are waiting on. Hello, I’m Lily.”

After introductions, she swept them away to a large room she called their public library. A group of children were settled in a corner of the room while an older lady read to them. On the other side, lounge chairs and a group of settees were arranged in a comfortable half circle.

“This is huge!” Olivia wasn’t able to keep her opinion to herself any longer. She raised her eyes from the high ceiling to the floor then giggled at her own outburst.

Lily joined in with with her. “You are right, it is and it

serves so many purposes. I'm glad you like our hotel and home, Olivia."

Next, they were introduced to the group of ladies waiting patiently. Olivia recognized Jenna from the café right away. Jenna scooted over so the ladies were able to take a seat.

"Now, let's get started," Miss Addie began. "We have exactly two weeks to get this charity ball arranged. As you all were informed, Olivia Young donated her beautiful gown to the event. Is there anything else we can add to the prizes?"

Olivia tried to pay attention but her head and heart was not there. Her thoughts kept moving in the direction of her husband, who was somewhere in town doing business with his twin brother. She was anxious to get this meeting over with, even though her purpose here was not only to help with the special charity ball but to recruit parents for the orphans. Even thought it was her heart's desire to get the orphan train here, she was longing to be with her husband as well. A thought struck her.

Was she falling in love? She'd have to consider it, especially when she placed more value in being with her husband than the orphan train.

It didn't take long to finish their business, even though she didn't have a clue what was discussed until Miss Addie brought up the golden subject. "Ladies, we've another project for consideration."

"Oh, my, I've got my hands full with the ball," Grace mentioned, fear in her soft voice.

The others laughed. “Not only with the ball. Those three children of yours keep you quite busy!”

Grace laughed then. “Not as busy as Hannah! She has five little ones compared to my three.”

Hannah brushed her off with a wave of her hand. “I have a ton of staff to help, my dear. You go it alone. I admire you more than you know!”

A small buzz began as each lady added more compliments. Miss Addie held up her hand, which silenced the group. “I’m going to give Olivia the floor. She came to me with a great idea that I support fully.”

It was good to have Miss Addie’s support and respect for what she was about to reveal. Olivia stood, not embarrassed at all to speak in front of a crowd. She had done this many times before at her father’s house. Here, it seemed a bit more intimate. “I am an orphan who was adopted soon after the first orphan trains began. I won’t go into great detail about my experience but I find the desire to bring an orphan train to Wichita Falls and beyond. I’ve done tremendous research and learned the three groups running this program are mostly sponsored by wealthy donors. If we can sponsor one trainload of children, as long as we have homes for them, the Children’s Aide Society and Children’s Village will most likely make it happen. I’m not sure about the New York Foundling Hospital since I’ve never heard back from them.”

Immediately several of the ladies spoke up. “Count me in,” Hannah told her. “My sons and daughters need to open up

their home and selves to others less fortunate."

"Thank you, Hannah." Olivia's cheeks warmed. The chances were becoming less impossible.

"I'll take in one, maybe an older child," Charity chimed in. "With the newspaper keeping us so busy, I don't know how I'd do with a smaller child, but I'm sure we can take one child."

Rebecca, the sheriff's wife agreed to take in one, after she spoke to her husband first. "He'll have to build on an extra room but I've been harping at him to do so for some time now."

"I'm here from the town of Mill Ridge," Sophie, Sheriff Nightingale wife told the rest. "I think we can take in another child or two and I'll speak to the rest of the ladies in town about the orphan situation."

Olivia was beside herself. With all of these fine women agreeing to take in children, it would be easier to get the orphan train here. She was anxious to send a letter to her contact person. Things were looking up. She didn't think her life could get any better.

"Thank you, everyone. From what I understand we will all need a recommendation from our pastor and the justice of peace."

Both Sophie and Rebecca laughed. "That task will be easy to accomplish since my husband is sheriff."

"Mine, too," Sophie agreed. "I'm sure both men will write a wonderful recommendation. We'll talk to Reverend Connor as

well."

After the meeting, Olivia and Naomi stepped outside to get some air. They peered up and down the street to get a glimpse of their husbands but they were not in sight yet. A bench sat along the side, away from the front door and lobby. "Let's take a seat here to wait."

Forty minutes later, the twin brothers came out of the telegraph office and made their way towards their wives. Olivia was excited to see what Wesley had in mind for the rest of their visit here. She wanted to shop but if they didn't get a chance to, it wouldn't matter. As long as she was with him she didn't care what they did.

Naomi sighed. "He's so handsome," she said right when Olivia mouthed the same words.

The two looked at each other and burst out laughing.

They were still laughing hard when the men fetched them.

"We leave you for a short time and look at the two of you!" Wesley scolded. He held out his arm while Olivia stood. It felt so right walking down the street with him, stopping at a few shops to look at the wares in the windows. Since she didn't need anything for her own home, she went along inside with Naomi to help her sister-in-law choose a few items for their cabin.

Then Olivia saw a beautiful music box she wanted to buy for the Widow Young. It was so pretty it made her think of his mother when she first saw it on the wooden shelf. Except she didn't have the money with her to do so. When she went to

fetch Wesley, she opened the shop door, the sound of the bell too quiet to make much noise. Her husband, his back to her, was in a deep conversation with his brother.

She didn't mean to hear the conversation.

"Her father is sending someone with the money," Wesley announced.

"How much money are we talking about?" Russell's voice was louder than Wesley. From where she stood, Olivia heard them loud and clear.

"Read the telegram."

She heard the crinkle of paper then Russell's voice. *"Olivia is dead to me. Stop. As promised, the sum of five thousand dollars will be sent by a messenger who will arrive shortly. Stop. Good riddance for taking her off my hands. Stop."*

The whole world around her went silent. A silence that made Olivia want to cover her ears. Wesley didn't say a word. He didn't defend her honor. He didn't curse her father's willingness to pay off the money he promised her years ago. All she knew was Wesley had been in touch with her father and was willing to take the money.

She turned to go back inside. Olivia was ready to admit she was falling in love with her husband. It was probably good she found out he wanted her for the money her father paid.

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Wesley swore under his breath. It wasn't anything a lady

wanted to hear if passing by. He stood on the boarded walk with his brother while Olivia was inside shopping. His fists clenched and unclenched. “How am I going to explain he wants nothing to do with her?”

Russell shrugged. “I’m not sure. Do you even have to say anything at all? Didn’t you say she wants nothing to do with him?”

“Imagine how that must feel to have a parent disown you. When she left it was of her own accord. Well, she had to run for her life before he placed her in a horrible marriage. She doesn’t have to worry about him every again. At least she’ll get the money he promised her years ago. Although, I’m not sure she will take it.”

Russell’s eyes lit up. “She wants to start a movement for the orphan train, which will take some money. Why not give her this money from a secret donor? Then you won’t have to tell her anything. Ever. You know I will never say a word, brother.”

“It would be lying.”

“Like you’ve never lied before.”

“This is different. I think I have to be honest. What if she finds out? I love her.”

Russell’s head snapped up. He gave Wesley a great big smile and slapped him on the back. “I knew it would happen sooner or later. Happy for you, brother.”

Wesley stared over top his brother’s head, into a street filled with people he didn’t recognize. What Russell had said

about depositing the money in an account and donating it to the orphan train movement was an excellent idea. It sure would make life easy doing it that way.

He was torn.

They had promised to be honest with each other.

Even though she had said she never wanted to deal with her adopted father again, to be told she wasn't wanted in a telegram had angered Wesley so much, he wanted to go to Dallas and confront the man. Was it worth it? Probably not.

"If you're thinking about a face to face confrontation with a man who has no soul, it will get you thrown in jail, Wesley."

"I figured as much, that's why you don't see me marching to the train depot."

Russell patted his shoulder. "Let's go inside, gather the ladies and go for a nice drive and picnic. Forget about her father. He's as crooked as a dog's back legs and it will come full circle some day."

Wesley followed him inside. "You're probably right. I'll make the decision about the money tomorrow. Right now, my wife deserves my attention."

Chapter 10

Olivia heard the bell above the door rattle. There was no way she was able to speak at the moment. She stared straight ahead, pretending to look at something on the shelf inside the glass counter. *Close your eyes. Remember when you were paraded in front of your parents guests and told to act pretty and smile but do not speak unless spoken to? That's what you must do now. Don't disappoint your father.*

She sucked in a breath so deep it made her shoulders shake slightly remembering her mother's words. They were so heartless and yet, Olivia was able to be as tough as nails. She came from the streets of New York city, originally, where only the toughest and most residual survive. There wasn't an obstacle her brother and her hadn't overcome. If anything, they rose to any challenge until they got caught and were carted off to an orphanage.

Olivia would not give in now. She'd never go back to living on the streets or living with someone who had abused her mental status with harsh words. There was no way she'd run to Calvin. He had his own life to worry about. Her brother was trying to make a life for himself. She was not going to search him out, not now. He didn't need to take care of his sister any longer.

No.

She was strong.

Capable.

If she were to be honest with herself, Wesley did treat her kindly. He made her laugh. He made her fall in love with him. She thought he was falling in love with her and then these actions showed her the real side of Wesley Young. He was like everyone else. All he wanted was money. Now, she had to focus on her work ahead.

Her deepest desire was to bring other orphans to loving homes. Something she had never known and now realized she will never know what it's like to be truly loved. At least she'd be able to give a home and love to some other child.

Olivia knew the moment Wesley stood beside her. She turned to him. Although it was one of the hardest things to do, she forced herself to smile. Hopefully, it reached her eyes but even if it didn't, she would not let him know she had heard his awful words.

She'd use him like he used her.

If she wanted to make a difference in the world, she needed a home to give children of lesser means. The farm was perfect for her cause.

She didn't need him. She needed his farm. Yet, the ache inside was real.

Her chin lifted a notch. He gazed at her then, a longing in his eyes she wasn't able to put her finger on. How can he be so loving and kind when he treated her no better than a saloon girl.

She suppressed a panic that had began the moment she heard his words. Olivia had to pretend indifference for her own well-being, otherwise, she'd fall to pieces in front of Wesley and the whole town of Wichita Falls.

For the next few hours, she kept her mind busy with thoughts of her father and mother and all the mean things they did to her and Cal. If she stayed in an angry state of mind, it would keep her from breaking down. It was tough, Wesley was treating her like a princess.

After shopping at a few of the merchants, the two couples intent was to have a picnic at the waterfalls right outside of town. Olivia didn't know how she'd get through smiling and laughing at the all the right things for much longer.

Wesley kept his eyes on her even if he didn't say much or ask her if there was anything wrong. It was as if he sensed her despair. Yet, he didn't ridicule or say anything to upset her more. As a matter of fact, he was being way too sweet.

How in the world was she going to get through this without shouting to the heavens above? Wesley and Russell were standing by the edge of the river talking while the women cleaned up. When a sob escaped, she looked up to find her husband watching her, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Is there something wrong?" Naomi asked, keeping her voice low.

Olivia shook her head. "I'm fine. Have a headache, that's all."

"If you say so. I'm always here for you if you want to talk,

just so you know."

"Thank you. I'm fine, truly." She was more than fine. At least that was what she kept telling herself. If she can get through this picnic and back to the farm, the sanctuary of her room was waiting. She made a vow to herself that no one will ever see her cry. She'd wait until she was alone to let her emotions explode. As long as she stays out of Wesley's way, he'll never realize how he hurt her. At least until she was able to compose herself.

She needed strength to get through. *Lord, give me the courage to face this. Show me how to get through this day. I can't do it alone.*

He must've been listening since Olivia made it back to the farm house in one piece and in a better frame of mind. Riding Dreamer was good for her soul. She rode alongside Wesley, who pointed out some of their neighbors homesteads. Even though she wasn't paying much attention to names, she nodded as if she were. Wesley had been quiet most of the way himself and she was glad. Olivia didn't feel much like talking.

At the farm, Jeremiah took Dreamer, so she made her way to the house quickly before Wesley took notice. She wanted to hide in her bedroom for a few minutes. "I'm going to lie down," she told Widow Young, passing by her as his ma came out the front door. "I've got a terrible headache."

The widow's hand shot out to stop her. "Can I make you some tea?"

Olivia shook her head. "I just need to lie down for a half

hour. I'll have tea afterwards."

"I'll keep water heated for you. I'm taking a ride over to Coopers Ridge to see the Reverend this afternoon and will be back by supper, which is finished and will need heated up in case I get back later than I planned."

Olivia tried to smile. "I'll take care of it if you aren't back in time." She ran up the stairs to get away from everyone. All she wanted was the sanctuary of her room as she closed the door and fell on her bed. Then the tears came. She shoved her face in the pillow and let herself cry.

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Olivia must've slept longer than she realized. Springing from the bed, she washed her tear-stained face, ran her fingers through her hair and tidied up her wrinkled dress. She hurried downstairs to light the stove again to warm up the pot of food. Taking the lid off to see what was for supper, the aroma of the beef stew made Olivia realize how hungry she was. Knowing she had only nibbled on the picnic lunch earlier, her belly grumbled now. She needed a hot cup of tea to hold her over until supper was ready.

After taking a nap, she did feel better. Her head was clear and not full of anxiety and doubt. Taking a peek in the small mirror hanging on the wall, she pulled the pins from her hair meaning to tighten the bun. When she let her hair fall across her shoulders and halfway down her back, Olivia wondered

what Wesley saw in her. Was she pretty enough for him? If she stayed here and made a life with him even though all he wanted her for was for the money, was she able to overcome the fact he took money on her behalf? Why had he gone to her father in the first place? How did they even know each other?

She didn't know the whole story, only the few words spoken. Her adopted father was a harsh man. Had he threatened Wesley? Although, her husband was not a man to be intimidated by anyone. He was brave and handsome and she really needed to find him and speak to him about this whole situation. After crying her heart out, Olivia decided she didn't want to leave here, ever. She wanted a life with her husband and if they were to bring children here, there had to be some kind of peace between the two of them. Was she prepared to ruin that by staying angry?

Wesley had no idea she overheard. She stared at herself for a moment longer. If she were honest with herself, did she even care about the money? Was she any better than him, wanting to get away from her life in Dallas she came here to escape? Perhaps the farm needed the money? She had to know.

Stepping outside on the porch after simmering the pot of stew, she saw Russell coming her way with a pail of milk from Dolly. He set it on the porch.

"Are you feeling better, Olivia?"

"Yes, much better. I need to speak with Wesley, have you

seen him?"

"He left earlier with Jeremiah to round up one of the cows who wandered off. He should be here any time now."

"Thanks, I must speak with him."

Russell tilted his head. "Is there anything I can do to help? You seemed a bit distressed earlier today. Wesley asked me to stay and look after you."

A sob almost caught in her throat. Wesley had noticed and kept someone here to make sure she was all right. She leaned over the rail. "I'll be honest, Russell, I overheard the conversation you and your brother had today."

He looked confused. "What conversation?" His eyes got huge. "Oh, that conversation! Not good!" he mumbled. "I think you should speak with Wesley about this."

She smiled. "I plan to. I wish I knew why he was in contact with my adopted father. I never wanted to hear that man's name again as long as I live and here my own husband was communicating with him. It hurts me so."

Russell ran a hand through his hair then pushed his hands deeper in his pockets. "He was trying to give him a chance to make things right with you. Wesley wanted the man to see you were doing well and didn't need him. He wanted Morris to know you were being taken care of and loved."

Olivia almost fell apart. She clutched onto the porch rail to hold herself up. "The money? Why did he accept money from him?"

Russell shook his head. "I really wish you would be talking

to Wesley about this."

"I need to know right now." Olivia was impatient now. She had to know.

"Wesley invited him here. He wanted to tell you what he did but was afraid Morris would not accept the invitation. Turns out he was right. Instead of coming here, Morris decided to send the money he had promised you a long time ago."

She smiled, it was a sad one though. "He noticed the letter was gone."

"The letter?"

"I made him sign a note when I was a child. It said he owed me five thousand dollars when I turn of age. When I left, I went to his safe and took the note. I heard you read the telegram, Russell. He is sending a man here to give the money and to collect that note to make sure I never try to trick him. All he wants is the note back."

Russell shook his head. "Why didn't he throw it away or toss it in the fire instead of keeping it in a safe?"

Olivia laughed. "He kept it to terrorize me. Especially after Cal left. He'd call me to his study and take out the note, reminding me of the promise I made to keep quiet about his secrets. He was a mean and heartless soul. You can bet he'll send one of his men. Now that he knows where I'm at, he'll send one of his own men."

As she spoke the words, a buggy turned down their road, a dust cloud rising up from the ground. Russell turned. "You

may have spoken too soon, Olivia. I think the man with the money is on his way right now."

Olivia hurried from the porch to stand beside Russell. "I want to see who he sends. I wish Wesley was here."

"Don't worry. We will collect the money and you can give him the note and he can be on his way."

"I don't have the note. It's somewhere along the railroad. I threw it from the window when I left Dallas that day."

Russell stiffened. "If he is sending a man to collect the note, this may not end well."

Olivia held her hand over her brow to keep out the sun. She sucked in her breath. Her father had sent Gaither Jones here! Thank God she was married now and didn't have to ever get near him again. She patted Russell on the sleeve. "Don't worry, he sent the man he tried to marry me to. I don't fear him one bit."

"Let's get this over and done with. By the looks of him, if Ma comes home she'll run him off with a shotgun."

That made Olivia smile. Widow Young didn't pull any punches. She surely would run this troublemaker off.

Jones pulled the buggy to a stop. "Whoa now!" He stayed on the bench, wanting the higher position so he was able to look down on them, Olivia presumed. "Well, take a look at you, Miss Olivia! Not so high-falutin now, are you?"

"Hand over the money, Gaither Jones. It belongs to me."

He held a small satchel in his hand, dangling it from two fingers. "You probably need this now that you are living like

a harlot."

Russell stepped forward. "Watch your mouth, mister."

Olivia held her hand up. "He likes to antagonize, don't let him get you riled."

"He's a dead man if he says it again."

"Get me the note, Olivia."

She took a step closer to the buggy. "The note has been destroyed. You don't honestly think I cared enough to keep it, do you? I threw it out the window the moment I left Dallas."

"Is that a fact? Too bad, I can't leave this money with you then."

"It belongs to me. You know it as well as I do. Hand it over before I get it myself."

Jones laughed. "How you going to do that?" He stood, taking a pistol from his coat jacket. Olivia stopped in her tracks, noticing how his hand shook with nervousness as he held the gun up.

"Put that away, Gaither. Put it away now!"

Russell stepped closer. "Put the gun down. No one needs to get hurt."

"You shut up! You stole Olivia from me. Do you think I'm going to let you get away with that?"

Olivia raised both hands in the air. "No, Gaither. This isn't Wesley. He's out on the farm. This is his twin brother, Russell." A fear began to seep up from the tips of her toes, slowly making its way up through her stomach and into her throat.

“You be quiet! Trying to say he has a twin! That’s so ridiculous. Just like you, Olivia. Maybe I’ll just shoot him dead and take you back home. You’d be a widow then and no one in Dallas would ever know you ran off and married this poor farm boy.”

Russell growled beside her. She was so worried he’d try to take on Gaither by himself. “Don’t move. He’ll just get more agitated,” she whispered.

Gaither’s hand was shaking now as he tried to steady the gun. His beady eyes searched the farm, looking for anyone else. “Get in the buggy, Olivia. Right now!”

Olivia knew if she got in the buggy, she’d have a better chance of saving Russell’s life. She prayed no one would get hurt. Never expecting this, she turned to her brother-in-law. “He’s not giving us much of a choice.”

“If you go with him, you may not come back. Let’s try to hold him off in the chance Wesley shows up.”

“We can’t chance waiting. He’s getting more and more upset. Let me get him calmed down and away from here. Please tell Wesley I love him.”

Not giving him a choice, Olivia moved away from Russell’s side. The moment she did so, she heard the sound of Gaither pulling the trigger. It was a horrendous sound as she flung herself in front of Russell. The sound of gunfire exploded in her ears. Olivia’s shoulder jerked back, causing her to stumble. She felt herself falling forward.

When she hit the ground her vision became blurred. The

pain in her shoulder was excruciating. She tried to grab her shoulder with her good hand but when she felt the sickening wetness, it made her head spin even more. She tried to lift her head towards the yelling and screaming going on. Before she knew what happened, darkness fell, hard.

Chapter 11

Wesley and Jeremiah reunited the stray with the small herd. He was anxious to get back home. “How about a small race, kid?”

“That sounds like a challenge but we’re only a half mile from home! I’ll win this one for sure!”

Wesley began to move faster, laughing as his mare pulled ahead of the boy. Jeremiah’s confidence was growing each day, maybe he should let the boy win. They were just about at the barn when a shot rang out. It wasn’t a hunter in the area since the land as far as you can see was Young land.

Jeremiah called out. “What was that!”

“It came from the farm!” Wesley pushed his mare even harder, taking the corner hard. He saw a strange buggy in the yard and Russell leaping on to the bench, tackling a stranger. Wesley raced towards them at full speed. That’s when he saw his wife on the ground.

The fear was real. It hit him like a sack of potatoes. He jumped from the horse like a wild man on the loose. Kneeling down, his wife was so pale and blood flowed from a shoulder wound. He tore off his shirt, the buttons popping off all at once, pressing it to the wound. He felt her pulse. She was

alive. Luckily, she was shot in the shoulder.

A roaring sounded in his ears. Who had done this to her? When he turned towards his brother, who now had a man on the ground with a knee in his back, he shouted, “What the hell happened here!”

Instead of waiting for an answer, he picked his wife from the ground and placed her in the fancy buggy. She needed a doctor. “You got this handled?” he shouted to Russell.

Jeremiah was also standing over the man on the ground, a shotgun pointed at him. Russell didn’t need to hold him down but he did anyway, pushing his knee in harder every time the man made a move or noise.

Naomi came running across the yard towards them. “What can I do to help!”

“Get in the buggy with Olivia, keep the cloth pressed to her shoulder.” When Naomi did as she was told, he nodded to his brother and took off through the gate that led to the White ranch.

The moment the buggy pulled up at the White house, ranch hands came running. Nora came through the front door, waving him inside. Wesley had known Nora had experience with gun wounds and his ma wasn’t home to help. He picked up his wife and carried her over the threshold.

“Put her in my room, back there,” Nora pointed to the door off the kitchen area. He placed his wife on the bed, pulling a quilt from the bottom and laying it over her. Listening to the sound of Nora’s voice, he heard the demands she made. The

woman took charge of every situation, he was glad he brought his wife here. She'd be in good hands.

"I need you to leave, Wesley."

"No."

Nora was adamant. She placed a bowl of water on the night stand. "I can't work with you in here on top of everyone. Go on now, she'll be fine. I've instructed my men to fetch Doc James. It won't be long until he gets here."

"I don't want to leave her." Wesley was torn. What if something happened while he was gone.

Nora shook her head. "The fact she is still alive and breathing is good news. Her color is pale but that's from losing blood. She needs to rest until the doc gets here. I need to clean this wound and Naomi is here to help me. Go on now, go wait on the doctor."

He reluctantly left the house to stand on the porch. After a few minutes, Wesley went out in the yard, wandering around the barn, pacing back and forth, waiting. He wanted to defy Nora and go back inside to make sure Olivia was fine. Yet, he wanted her cared for as well.

"Wesley, how is she?" Russell rode up, holding a shotgun.

He stopped pacing and shook himself. He hadn't heard his brother ride up at all. Didn't even notice when he did. "Nora is taking care of the wound until the doc gets here."

"I hope they bring the sheriff, too. I want that sonofabitch off our land."

"Why are you armed? Is there more of them?"

“Never can be too cautious,” Russell told him. Wesley had to agree. They were farmers, not cowboys but they knew how to protect their own.

“Where is he?”

Russell stared at him.

“Where is he? Where did you put him?”

“Wesley, I see the look in your eyes, brother. It’s best you don’t know right now.”

“You don’t know anything. I want to know what you did with him?”

“I know exactly how you feel. We are twins, remember?”

Fury was building inside Wesley. “If anything happens to her, I’ll kill him before he goes off to jail.”

“She knows about the money.”

Wesley stopped pacing. “She knows? How?”

“She overhead me reading the telegram out loud in front of the shop.”

Wesley frowned. “Olivia never mentioned she heard. Why didn’t she say so?” He began to pace again. “Now I understand why she wasn’t acting herself today.” He ran a hand through his hair, across his troubled brow. “How do I fix this?”

“No need to. That’s why you have a twin.” Russell grinned.

Wesley wanted to laugh but he didn’t have it in him. His gut ached. “I love her.”

“Yeah, you told me that before.”

Wesley grinned. “I guess I did. Here comes the doc. Looks

like the sheriff is in tow."

Two horses came flying down the lane, one with Doc James and his wife, Nurse Ellie holding the doctor's bag, along with the Sheriff. Russell whistled. "They didn't mess around, did they?"

"Nope. That's the thing about this place. Everyone takes care of each other."

"That's for sure. Come on, brother."

Wesley waited outside on the porch while the doc looked in on his wife. Nurse Ellie came out several times to let him know how she was doing. It didn't help that time seemed to stand still.

Russell took the sheriff to the farm to pick up the criminal. Jeremiah returned to pick up the buggy, taking it back to the farm. Wesley didn't pay much attention after that. He watched the others with a half heart while he paced back and forth, wearing a hole in the porch.

When his ma showed up, she went in to check on Olivia then came back out and sat on the porch with him. "She is resting. The doc is instructing Nora what to do and how much medicine to give her. I think you'll be able to sit with her soon."

Wesley was glad his Ma had come home and taken over. Even though Nurse Ellie came out to give him a report, there was nothing like having your mother close by.

The buggy came through the gate. Jeremiah drove close to the porch, the sheriff alongside on his large mount, pointing a

rifle at the bound man on board. His hands were tied behind his back, as well as his feet. He wasn't going anywhere except jail. When he saw Wesley, he stared at him, blinking, then stared again. "Olivia was right, you are twins."

Wesley raged inside. He leaped over the porch railing, marched up to the man in the buggy, pulled back his arm and slammed a fist so hard in the side of his head, it knocked Gaither Jones to the other side of the bench. If it wasn't for the straps tied to his feet, he'd have been knocked off the wagon to the ground.

Jones yelped, trying to straighten up. He was now lying sideways on the bench. "You see that, Sheriff, arrest that man for assaulting me!"

The sheriff shrugged. "I didn't see a thing."

Gaither Jones was red in the face by the time he righted himself. "You'll lose your job for this. Mr. Morris won't take kindly to railroading me. I'm his right hand man!"

"Right now, you are going to jail for the attempted murder of a well respected woman. I doubt even Morris can save you from this crime." The sheriff turned to Wesley. "I hear your wife is owed some money from this criminal. I found this bag of cash on his person. I'm assuming it belongs to your wife."

Wesley nodded. He wanted to have another go at the man but figured if he did it again the sheriff may arrest him this time for assault. Instead, he took the money. "She earned this."

"I'll be back, Wesley. Looks like we got us a new buggy and

a horse!" Jeremiah called out as he took off with the sheriff.

When he turned around, Nurse Ellie and the doctor were on the porch. "How is she?" he asked, his attention on the doc.

Doc James snapped his bag shut. He gave his wife an hug. "Thanks, darling." She rewarded him with a kiss. That was all fine and dandy but Wesley wanted to know how his wife is.

The doc turned to Wesley. "She needs to rest tonight. No upsetting her about the crime or what happened. Tomorrow she will be feeling better and can travel back home. Luckily it isn't too far. My wife showed Nora how to take care of the wound so no infection sets in. It was a superficial wound, no bullets were found, so she is lucky it shimmied across her skin and didn't hit any bone."

"Thanks, Doc."

He nodded and left with his wife. Nurse Ellie wrapped her arms around the doctor's waist as they rode off. They looked more like two lovers going for a ride instead of a serious town doctor and nurse. Wesley ached to see his wife. "I'm going to sit with her."

When he got inside, he sat down on the chair beside her bed. A bottle of laudanum sat on the night stand. Olivia was sleeping soundly so he didn't try to wake her. He watched her sleep, taking her hand at one point, feeling the warmth of her against his skin. "I love you," he whispered.

She stirred. He thought she was going to open her eyes but then her breathing became more steady as she fell into a deeper sleep. Wesley sat with her all night long while Nora

came in on occasion to check the wound. “The doc gave her a heavy dose of medicine, Wesley, she will sleep for hours before she wakes up. It’s almost daylight. Go do your chores since I know you won’t get any rest and come back when you’re done. I’ll sit with her.”

Nora was right. When he left, he noticed his ma sitting on the rocker outside, waiting. Her head was leaning to one side while she slept. He shook her shoulder softly. “Wake up, Ma. Time to go home.”

Widow Young got up and they went back to the farm together. “Thanks for waiting with me, Ma.”

His mother turned to him. “I know the heartache, son. The waiting and wondering if you would see the person you love again is an awful feeling. I wasn’t going to let you do it alone.”

He gave her a hug. She had been through so much. “You deserve someone to take care of you, Ma.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You never know, maybe I have found someone.”

Wesley pulled back. “The reverend of Cooper’s Ridge?”

She smiled. “I’ll let you know when the time comes. Right now, take care of yourself and your wife. I’m going in the house to rest. Breakfast will be a few hours late.”

“Naomi can make breakfast. You sleep in. I’ll go right now and let her know. I see a light on.”

He didn’t need to tell Naomi anything. As he made his way towards their cabin, Russell’s wife came across the yard,

swinging a basket. “Your brother is in the barn milking Dolly. See you in an hour for breakfast.”

Without a doubt, when Wesley turned the corner, there was his brother, talking to the cow. “Dolly, you missed all the action. Imagine if you can, the woman you love gets shot by someone.”

Wesley laughed when Dolly turned back to look at Russell. “She actually understands you, brother.”

Russell stared over his shoulder. “How is she?”

“Sleeping. Nora is sitting with her while I do my chores.”

“I can handle them for you if you want me to.”

No, it’ll give me something to do while she sleeps. Thanks for being there, brother.”

“She saved my life. He had the gun pointed right at me. Took a shot before anyone knew what happened. Except Olivia’s instinct kept me from being killed. You better treat her right, Wesley. I owe her my life.”

“I left the money on the night stand in case she wakes up. She’ll see I don’t want it.”

“It’s not about the money. I doubt she cares.”

“I hope it isn’t too late for us.”

“It’s never too late.” Russell stood, giving Dolly a pat on the behind. “Let me get this milk up to the house and I’ll help you with your chores. Before you tell me no, we can team up and you can help me with mine. I’m wanting to spend the afternoon with my wife.”

“It’s a deal. The sooner I can get back to Olivia, the better.

Even if I have to sit on the porch while Nora fusses over her."

Russell grinned. "I plan to fuss all over my wife today."

Wesley shook his head.

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Olivia sat up to eat breakfast. Nora cleaned the wound, wrapping it back up like an expert. She brought in a tray and set it across Olivia's lap. "After breakfast, I believe there's someone who wants to see you."

She nodded. "Wesley?"

Nora grinned. "He's done put a hole in my porch from all the pacing and worrying about you. Come on, eat up. I'll send him in when he gets back."

Olivia turned to the night stand where the satchel of money sat. It was the first thing she noticed when her eyes fluttered open at daylight. It was a sign he didn't want her money. The thought made her smile. In matters of the heart, she sure was not very experienced. Wesley had wanted to show her father he was going to love her and care for her now.

When he came back she was going to tell him how she felt and that the money didn't matter. She wanted him to know it wasn't even about the orphans at this point. Getting hurt brought some enlightenment to her mind.

She had finished breakfast when she heard his footsteps at the door. He came to her, taking her in his arms. Wesley sat carefully on the edge of the bed, careful not to hurt her.

“It’s okay, Wesley, the medicine is making everything numb right now.”

“I don’t want you hurt any more than you already have been.”

She touched his cheek. “We must talk.”

He nodded. “We will, as soon as we get you home. Doc James said you can go home today as long as you promise to rest.”

“No worries about that, I am so weak right now. Not too weak to talk, I think we need to get things settled right here and now.”

“What if Nora comes in.”

“Lock the door.”

He gave her a look and grinned. “My, my, that medicine is making you quite brave.” She giggled when he did as she asked, the sound of the key turning in the lock. He returned to the bed, making himself more comfortable.

She placed her hand back on his cheek. “I want you to know that I love you, first and foremost, but we can’t continue the way we have.”

Wesley stiffened. “I love you, Olivia.” His words, low, intense, made her shiver. It was like a dam burst wide open. She burst into tears.

He gathered her in his arms, rocking her back and forth, careful not to touch her wounded shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I can’t take those words back.” His voice sounded so worried, it made her laugh through her tears.

“I think I’m crying out of pure joy, Wesley. To hear you say those words after what I’ve been through means the world to me. No amount of my father’s money can replace how you make me feel right now.”

“I’ll say them every single day if you want me to, although it may be some of the medicine making you feel like this.”

she wiped at her tears. “No, I just now took a dose. I want to go home to my own room. There’s a lot of work to do, Wesley. If you don’t need the money for the farm, I have an idea on how to use it.”

Wesley tipped her chin. “My love, I never needed the money for the farm. We are quite well off. Maybe not to your father’s standards, but we have something more. We’ve got more love on that little farm than the whole town of Dallas.”

“I can feel that love. It’s what I’ve wanted all my life. I’ve longed for a simple place to lay my head each night. Right here, with you.”

Wesley looked like he was about to cry himself. “Olivia, tell me again how much you love me.”

“I’d rather show you.”

He sat back, the grin on his face wide as can be. “When you are better, I can’t wait for you to show me.”

She giggled. “Will you promise to keep me forever, husband.”

“Yes, after all, I have no choice.”

She was starting to feel drowsy. Her words slurred slightly. It was from the laudanum that was taking affect. “What do

you mean, you have no choice?" Was she hearing him right.

"It's past our thirty days. Even if we didn't consummate our marriage yet, you can't get out of it now."

She pretended to act surprised. "You mean I'm stuck with you?"

He grinned, nuzzling her neck. "Yes, and I'll never let you go."

She wrapped her good arm around him, giving him a slow, heartfelt kiss. "With the money on that table, we'll be able to sponsor a train filled with orphans. I may be so busy there won't be time to show you how much you are loved."

He threw back his head and laughed out loud. "My love, never tease a Young. You'd have plenty of time for loving if I took in every single child on that orphan train. Then, we'd have plenty of time together since you wouldn't be off searching for homes for them."

Olivia looked horrified. She didn't mind a few children to take care of but imagine a trainload! "I'm afraid a house full of children would render us so busy we'd never see each other. Unless you plan to hire a maid or two."

He kissed her quiet. "No maids for you, my love. You'll never go back to that kind of life."

"Thank you, Lord," she said aloud.

Olivia was content, happy and in love, even though she had to get shot to find the true meaning of her life. Had it been worth it? She drifted off in her husband's arms.

It was worth it, every single moment of her life that led her

here, into this man's arms.

This was home.

Thank you for reading Wesley and Olivia story.

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"Look out for your own"
-the code of the west

"Good morning, Miss Addie! What brings you to Mill Ridge so early?" Elizabeth was happy to see her mentor at the front door even if the older woman seemed to be in a state of agitation. Her dark well-kept hair was askew, along with a few strands out of place. Elizabeth noted her being a bit out of sorts for the well-managed woman everyone knew and loved.

Miss Addie took off her riding gloves as she stepped in to the foyer of the boarding house. She looked around. "You've done an excellent job here, Elizabeth. I know taking over for Sophie so quickly was difficult and I promise to send you off as a mail order bride soon, you have my word."

Elizabeth welcomed the woman with a hug. "Please, sit and have some tea."

The pot was steaming on the stove. Elizabeth was always up before her guests, planning out the days meals and making sure everything was in order for breakfast. As soon as Rose, her helper and partner for the time being, finished her early

morning work, the two would start breakfast.

She poured two cups of tea, setting them on the table, along with a porcelain bowl filled with sugar and a fresh cup of cream. After serving, she sat down to wait for Miss Addie to begin. She knew it was fruitless to ask the older woman any questions until they had their tea. Her curiosity was piqued.

"How is Sophie adjusting to married life with our new sheriff, Salem Nightingale?" Miss Addie didn't seem to be in a hurry now that she was settled in at the table.

Elizabeth took a sip of tea. She had replaced Sophie, who managed the boarding house up until she married a lawman. "Wonderful, she spent the first few weeks after her honeymoon teaching me the ropes about match-making and running this place. So far I've matched a farmer with one of our wonderful ladies. Jocelyn is so happy with Fred Williams. Then there is Nanette, she's the quiet one in the crowd, she married Jonathan Myers, one of the workers at the mill. I'm very happy you are allowing me to be a matchmaker, Miss Addie, although I'll never be quite as good as you when it comes to this position."

Miss Addie shook her head. "Oh don't be prudent. You do a fine job, everyone tells me so. I'm sure you will have every chance to match up every single man in this town and beyond."

Elizabeth smiled. "If I did that, I would be out of a job."

"Nonsense, you will be married off by then to a wonderful

man. When you took this position to help get the boarding house and matchmaking service started here in Mill Ridge, I promised to fulfil your original request to find you a wonderful husband, and I will."

"You are right. Miss Addie. Thank you for the kind words. I believe our Rose is sweet on one of our boarders. And, Reverend Pope feels the same way about her. She is next in line for a husband, but it may turn out I won't have to do any matchmaking after all. If you would like, please send over two more ladies for me to work with. I will begin my work with them immediately. Perhaps we will wait to see what happens between Rose and the Reverend."

"I'm impressed, Elizabeth. When we rescued all of the women from that horrible man awhile back, I had no idea so many would still be here. I was certain all of the girls would go back to their prospective homes. I'm happy to say nine of you stayed. Which is a wonderful thing since there are so many single men that need a good wife. We will build this town up just like we did Wichita Falls."

"There isn't too many women here and it can be lonely for some of us. If it weren't for Rose and Sophie, and the two ladies we just matched up, this town would be all men. We have to fix it soon, Miss Addie. Can you send me two more mail order brides? I have two extra rooms at the moment. I can place two ladies in one room and rent the other spare room out."

"Of course, if you feel ready to take on more, I'll send them

over tomorrow. I think I know which two are ready to become brides. My boarding house is filled up and the five ladies left have to share rooms, making it difficult to keep tempers in check at times. Now, the reason I am truly here is to see Sheriff Nightingale. It seems a man rode in to our town last night asking to be directed to Mill Ridge. I was hoping I beat him here since he wasn't up and about when I left this morning."

"I've been up since daylight and haven't seen or heard anyone trek through," Elizabeth answered. "Why the concern?"

"He had the looks of an outlaw. I don't want to alarm anyone but I got the impression he was on a serious quest. He was looking for someone specific. He was asking questions and showing a photo of a woman."

Elizabeth smiled. "No worries then, there are only a few women here. Sophie is happily married, tucked away in the Sheriff's cottage and Rose and I are the only two other women in town. Jocelyn and Nanette live outside of town. I wonder who he is looking for?"

"Perhaps he is here to stir up trouble and yet I don't get that awful feeling about him I usually do when someone bad passes through."

"Well, you go on and see the Sheriff. I'll need to get breakfast started. It's been a pleasure to have you here."

The moment she spoke the words, Rose came tumbling down the steps. The girl was so clumsy, she almost fell down

the last three. She came in to the kitchen like a whirlwind, all smiles and tucking strands of hair in her bun. Elizabeth had sent her up to tidy the empty rooms earlier in case a guest arrived without notice, which almost always happened.

"Miss Addie! So nice to see you." Rose gave her mentor a hug, while Elizabeth looked on in amusement. The girl was simply a mess.

"Good day, ladies," Miss Addie told them before rushing out to find the sheriff.

Elizabeth turned to Rose. "Really, young lady, can you please go and straighten your hair. It looks as if you haven't combed it."

Rose giggled. "I haven't. I woke up late and pushed it back out of the way. Reverend Pope seems to think I am adorable."

"He told you that?" Elizabeth was shocked. When had the reverend been talking like that to Rose? She would need to keep a better eye on the two. After all, Elizabeth took it upon herself to mentor Rose and get her ready for her stint as a mail-order bride. If Reverend Pope wanted to marry her, he'd have to say so before Elizabeth put any time or effort into finding Rose a husband.

Rose giggled again, placing a pan on the stove. She began to crack the eggs in to the pan, one by one. "He always tells me how beautiful I am, and that I have an inspiring smile."

"He shouldn't be telling you those things in private, Rose. He needs to say if he wants to court you."

Rose sighed. "Oh, how wonderful that would be. I am

afraid I'm falling for the good reverend."

"The reverend is here in the boarding house until his sanctuary is ready. The church is being re-built and the sanctuary will be done shortly. No flirting with the good man, Rose. In the meantime, Miss Addie said there is a stranger coming to town. He was in Wichita Falls last night and is looking for a woman. Steer clear of any strangers, Rose."

"I will, Elizabeth." The younger Rose turned to Elizabeth. "Please don't worry. The reverend hasn't done anything damaging. He's a man of God and his kind words were always spoken on the porch in public."

"I'm relieved to hear this, Rose. I'm afraid we may be short on eggs this morning. I see the good doctor is in town so I'm going to go over to see if I can buy some from his stock he keeps in the back yard. I shall only be about twenty minutes at the most."

"Take the empty basket and fill it up, please. We may need a few more this morning as I plan to bake a cake this afternoon."

Elizabeth took the basket, swinging the handle as she left the boarding house. Rose was going to bake a cake for the reverend after he had mentioned his love of chocolate cake. She smiled to herself. Oh, how wonderful it would be to have the growing excitement of a new love.

She didn't think she'd ever fall in love again. Perhaps Elizabeth was cursed. She had been engaged to a wonderful man. They had grown up together in the same town. Their

families spent time together, they all went everywhere together.

When the outlaw gang came to their small town in Kansas, they began to torment the residents. They would rob townsfolk right off the street and no one was able to stand up to them. At first it was mild but when the gang robbed the bank and killed everyone inside, Elizabeth's whole world had changed.

Her mother, father and two younger brothers had been in the bank that day. Her fiancé brother, who owned the bank, was killed, along with his parents and grandmother.

Her fiancé had been out of town, looking over a plot of land he planned to buy. He had saved for two years to buy the land and he had promised her it would be theirs. When he had returned to find his brother and parents dead, along with the others, he had changed overnight.

His behavior had changed as he began sending telegrams to places far away. He spent less time with Elizabeth even though she needed him more than ever. Her whole family was wiped out. She had no one and yet he began to pull away from her no matter what she said or did.

His whole world revolved around waiting for each telegram, then leaving town on his horse for days at a time. His clothing began to get sloppy as if he didn't care what he looked like. Hair that was short and clipped, was now long and choppy, hiding under a wide-brimmed cowboy hat.

Elizabeth became more worried day after day. She watched

his looks turn in to one like the outlaws he swore he hated.

Then one day he simply rode out of town. She had watched from her family home as he mounted his horse, knowing deep in her heart it would be the last time she'd ever see him.

The hurt that day was too immense to relive. When she had realized what he was going to do, she ran out the front door, lifting her skirts and striking up dust as she ran as fast as she could to stop him from leaving. "Wait! What are you doing?" She had cried out but he didn't look her in the eye.

"I'm a lost soul, Elizabeth. It's better this way. Go on with your life."

She stood there, willing him to look at her but he kept the brim of his hat low over his eyes. "I love you," she told him. "Doesn't that account for anything?"

A strange man she didn't recognize strolled from the saloon, dusting his hat and placing it on his head. He got on his horse and rode over to the two of them. "Ready?"

Her fiancé nodded. He directed his next words to her. "Love someone else. I'm done with this town and everyone in it."

She charged at him, reaching up to grab his leg. She tried to look up at him but he kept avoiding her eyes. "Why, my love, why? We can get through this together."

"Forget about me, Elizabeth Sheldon. I'm not your kind of man. I don't love you any more."

Shock filled her from the top of her head down to the tips of her boots. Her skirts went flying as she ran back to the

haven of her family home, unable to watch the man she loved leave town. *I don't love you any more!* She'd never, ever forget those words as long as she lived.

Elizabeth stumbled as she crossed the street, realizing she was revisiting a part of her past she had shoved under the porch mat over a year ago. Was this job as match-maker causing her to relive her past? Perhaps she should tell Miss Addie to hurry and find her a husband. She closed her eyes for a moment, unsure how to move on. If she married someone else, was it fair to them knowing she'd never be able to love anyone else ever again? Her first attempt at love went horribly wrong, then the mail order bride fiasco fell through when that awful man tried to sell them as slaves. Perhaps it wasn't in the cards for her to be happy.

Realizing it was probably better this way, she decided to tell Miss Addie not to find her a husband. She would stay here, make this home. There was no reason she couldn't run the boarding house and live her life the same as Miss Addie.

"Good morning, Elizabeth. Are you here for some eggs?"

Elizabeth hadn't realized she was standing on the porch of the doctor's office. A few folks were staring. "Good morning, Nurse Ellie. May I buy some please? We're running short."

"Help yourself, Elizabeth. It's busy here today, so just put your money on the counter as you leave. I'm afraid I don't have time to have tea with you."

The good doctor and Nurse Ellie spent two days a week in Mill Ridge to help out until a doctor became available. Miss

Addie donated the house and office for the doctor's use since she owned four or five different establishments in Mill Ridge, too. The doctor and his nurse-wife were trying to see all of the patients possible in the two days they had available.

So, Elizabeth was glad Nurse Ellie was too busy to talk. She didn't feel like holding a conversation with anyone today. Bringing up the past even in her mind was too distressing. She fumbled at the door to the back yard, stepping in chicken poop one too many times. After a struggle, Elizabeth collected the eggs she needed, placed the money on the counter and quickly left the doctors office without speaking to any of the patrons waiting on the porch.

"Good day, Elizabeth," Nurse Ellie told her as she came out to gather the next patient.

Elizabeth turned to wave to Nurse Ellie who was staring down the street, a look of awe all over her face. It wasn't normal for the nurse to show her emotions. She heard Ellie speaking to one of the townsfolk. "Do you know who that is?"

Elizabeth watched the exchange, wondering why the look of adoration appeared on everyone's face when they began to stare.

Slowly, some townsfolk stood. "It is him! I saw it in yesterdays paper."

"Who?" Elizabeth asked, confused.

"Why, it's all over the news. The Mill Ridge Journal put the story out yesterday. Didn't you read the paper, Elizabeth?"

"I, uh, no." She was ashamed to admit she bought the

paper for her renters but was usually too busy to take time to read. Day old paper made good starter for the cook stove.

"You missed it then," Ellie noted. "I can't believe we are fortunate to have in our town the Texas Ranger who single-handedly took down the Riley Gang."

"Texas Ranger? Impressive." Even though she wasn't impressed. Where was the law when those outlaws wiped out everyone she had loved in her small Kansas town? She almost hated law men as much as she hated outlaws. Elizabeth should be ashamed of feeling so awful. The bitterness would eat her alive if she didn't keep it in check. No matter, she had to get back to help Rose with breakfast. The renters would be up and ready to be served by now.

"Have a good day, Nurse Ellie. Stop in for tea soon."

Nurse Ellie nodded, still staring at the stranger. Elizabeth shook her head, swinging around to see what the big deal was.

The horse was about two feet away. She noticed the Ranger's clothing first, as the horse was so tall she came face to face with the man's thigh. She needed him to move on so she could cross the street. When he stayed right there, she tried to keep her temper in check. "Oh for Pete sake, mister. Would you mind, I'm trying to cross the street."

Elizabeth's patience was running out. She hadn't realized she had dallied so long, it was important for her to do her job and make sure her guests were fed and on their way. She pulled the egg basket closer, gathered up her skirts with her

free hand and stepped on to the street.

“Elizabeth,” the raspy sound came from the man on the horse, its familiar lull causing her to raise her head in utter surprise.

Her head began to pound, the sound of his voice the only thing she understood. Voices in the background faded out. All Elizabeth saw was a pair of blue-gray eyes staring down at her.

His eyes.

The man she had loved with all her heart and soul.

She let the basket of eggs slide from her fingers. Some rolled from the basket, cracking as they hit the dirt ground.

Her heart felt as if it were pounding a mile a minute, her throat so tight she didn’t have the capacity to speak. Shock overcame reality. She knew he was speaking to her, saw the motion of his mouth but had no clue how to make out the words he was saying. He began to slide from the big stallion, and yet she kept her eyes on his, like a magnet, as if she didn’t dare break contact.

If she did, this would be a dream and she knew she’d wake up to realize it wasn’t real.

Her throat became dry, her nostrils flared. She reached out, wanting to touch him so bad. Her body felt as if it were floating away from him instead of towards him, so she tried to grab him as he came closer. It didn’t work, the clouds gathered around and pulled her away. “Noah,” she whispered, his name on her lips as she fell into the darkness.

Available on Amazon: An Outlaw's Honor